

# HOME CINEMA

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## Choice



### REVIEWS

Acoustic Energy  
100 Series 5.1  
REL subwoofer  
Focal in-ceiling  
Atmos speakers  
Yamaha  
RX-A3070 AVR  
Bluesound Pulse

# THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

Why Samsung's Q9 QLED TV is the bright star of 4K HDR

## System selector

We assemble setups to suit your budget

## 4K for all

£1,500 Ultra HD projector megatest



**WIN!**  
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Classic anime  
*Ghost in the Shell*  
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→ BLU-RAY SECRETS WITH THE BFI → OPINION → PRO CINEMA INSTALL → MORE

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Tel: 0844 412 2262  
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Distributed in the UK by Marketforce UK Ltd

BACKGROUND WALL IMAGES:  
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Home Cinema Choice, ISSN 1359-6276, is published monthly with an additional issue in May by AVTech Media Ltd, a division of MYTIME MEDIA Ltd, Suite 25, Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, UK. The US annual subscription price is £68GBP (equivalent to approximately \$98USD). Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11434. US Postmaster: Send address changes to Home Cinema Choice, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at CDS GLOBAL Ltd, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9EF. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.



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4K picture palace, p30

# Welcome

By the time you read this, *Avengers: Infinity War* will have broken the \$1bn box office barrier on its way to becoming the biggest film of 2018. Many of you will have already seen it. Home cinema enthusiasts we may be, but we can still enjoy a trip out to a commercial theatre.



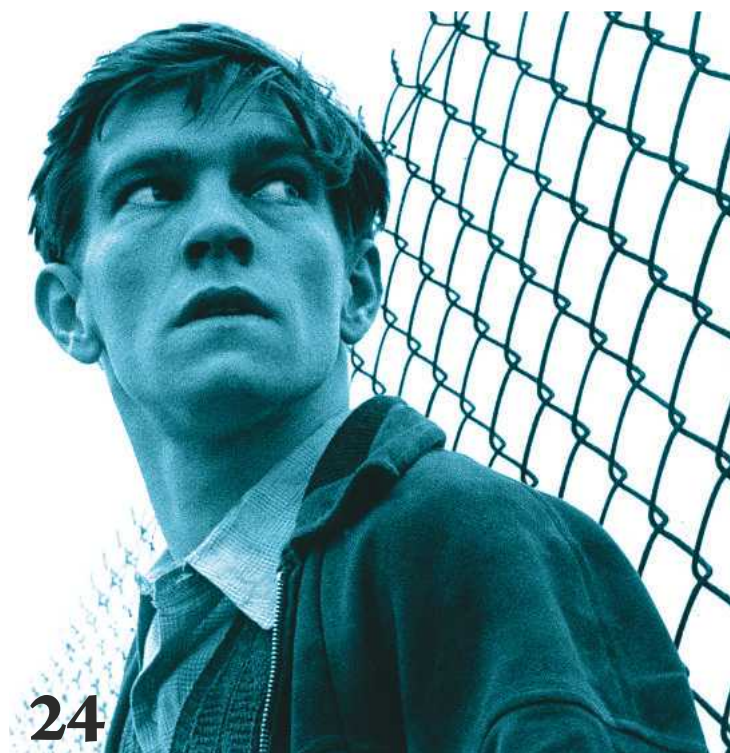
And the cinema industry is changing rapidly. We're seeing more and more simultaneous theatrical/streaming releases; **big-budget films are being created for domestic viewers**, bypassing multiplexes altogether; and the explosion of the Chinese market is giving Hollywood the jitters.

This means that what's on at your local multiplex doesn't fully represent what you may choose to watch on your AV setup. You may well squeeze your viewing of *Infinity War* between a boxset binge. That's why this issue we've started looking at streamed content in our *Playback* section. Don't worry, we're still all about Blu-ray – but the times they are a-changing...

*Mark Craven*  
Editor



# MENU



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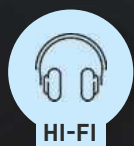
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# The GLOBAL TECHNOLOGY AWARDS

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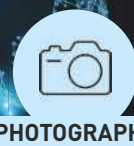
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# BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** Q ACOUSTICS 3000i speaker series borrows premium tech  
 OPPO High-end marque bows out of Blu-ray TERRA VIRTUA Building a customisable VR app  
 JVC PJ brand embraces DLP for low-cost 4K AT THE PLEX Coming to a cinema near you this month  
 BLACK PANTHER Marvel mega-hit ready to roar on Ultra HD Blu-ray & MORE!

## HEOS primed for 4K era

Denon HEOS HomeCinema HS2 → [www.denon.co.uk](http://www.denon.co.uk)



Denon has beefed up the specification of its multiroom-ready HEOS soundbar/subwoofer combi to enable 4K passthrough over HDMI, plus hi-res audio playback, while restyling the cabinet design for a sleeker look. The £700 HEOS HomeCinema HS2 features dual 5in midbass drivers and 0.75in tweeters, supported by its wireless subwoofer. Other connections include optical and coaxial digital inputs, USB and Bluetooth, plus streaming direct from the HEOS app. It's available now from Denon dealers.

### HCC ONLINE...

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# Revamped in style

Q Acoustics 3000i → [www.qacoustics.co.uk](http://www.qacoustics.co.uk)

Featuring floorstander, centre channel, subwoofer and two bookshelf designs, Q Acoustics' new 3000i series looks a good fit for a home cinema setup. A revision of the previous 3000 range, and borrowing cabinet construction tricks from the company's Concept 500 speakers, the 3000i claims improved bass response and lower distortion, and offers a more streamlined design. A 5.1 package featuring the 3050i floorstanders is available for £1,345; a smaller package using the 3010i speakers sells for £895. Finish options are Graphite Grey, English Walnut, Carbon Black or Arctic White.





## Star Wars sonics go large



Launched on May 4th (well, obviously) and produced in collaboration with *Star Wars* costume designer Andrew Ainsworth, the Original Stormtrooper Speaker from Thumbs Up UK is

a stereo wireless model that wants to bring a touch of the Dark Side to your AV den.

A 'life-size' version, as opposed to the previous 'mini' option, this £200 Bluetooth speaker claims a 2 x 10W power output and features a 3.5mm input for wired devices, plus an integrated LED lightshow.

[www.thumbsupuk.com](http://www.thumbsupuk.com)

## Sony AF8 OLED hits shops



Sony's second-generation OLED TV, the AF8, has now reached UK retailers – launch pricing for the 55in model is £2,500, while the bigger 65in

iteration is ticketed at £3,300. The AF8 TVs use the company's X1 Extreme processing, Triluminos display technology and again incorporate Acoustic Surface trickery for an 'invisible' sound system. HDR compatibility extends to Dolby Vision, and Android-powered smart skills include Chromecast built-in and voice search.

[www.sony.co.uk](http://www.sony.co.uk)

# Oppo shuts down Blu-ray

High-spec brand ceases manufacture, but promises future firmware



Oppo Digital, the AV/hi-fi division of Chinese corporation Oppo, has announced that it will shut down operations this Summer, leaving a gap in the premium 4K player market that consumers will hope other brands can fill.

'As Oppo's latest 4K UHD players reach the pinnacle of their performance, it is time to say goodbye,' said the company in an official statement. 'Oppo is proud to have made such well-regarded products and to have served the enthusiast community. Without its customers' suggestions, encouragement, and support, Oppo could not have accomplished these achievements.'

Oppo Digital was established in 2004 in North America, initially becoming known for its premium DVD players. Blu-ray and Ultra HD Blu-ray spinners have since followed, including the current UDP-203 and UDP-205. It has also expanded its business to include DACs, headphones and headphone amplifiers. Oppo will continue its mobile phone business.

## Still bashing bugs?

This surprising news will have current Oppo 4K player owners concerned over the future of their hardware, particularly as Oppo has been active in issuing firmware updates (down to fixing bugs that

relate to specific disc releases) and has an HDR10+ update in the pipeline.

Yet Oppo Digital says after-sales care won't be abandoned: 'Existing products will continue to be supported, warranties will still be valid, and both in-warranty and out-of-warranty repair services will continue to be available. Firmware will continue to be maintained and updates released from time to time.'

While this statement is reassuring, it may not be enough to convince potential buyers from looking elsewhere. Panasonic, with its incoming DP-UB820 and DP-UB9000 hardware (both models will support both Dolby Vision and HDR10+ formats) is surely well set to strengthen its position as a premium BD brand.

There's also Cambridge Audio. Its CXUHD spinner shares the same Mediatek silicon as Oppo's machines. Yet the company has told *Forbes* that firmware updates are a 'joint activity' with Oppo. 'Both companies feedback to Mediatek and together we work to improve the performance and robustness of the platform.'

Any AV enthusiast still considering purchasing an Oppo deck should hurry. Oppo Digital UK says it will carry on trading 'while stocks last', but that it expects to close its doors in the Summer. *HCC* understands that the flagship UDP-205 is already out of stock.

## Playlist...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

### Buck Rogers in the 25th Century (All-region BD)

The cast of this classic slice of disco-era TV sci-fi have never looked better than they do on Blu-ray, courtesy of this boxset's terrific 1080p encodes.



### The Shape of Water (Ultra HD BD)



Why wait until late June for the UK release when you can import this award-winning fantasy on 4K BD from the US right now?

### Suicide Squad: Hell to Pay (All-region BD)



The DC Animated Movie Universe goes full grindhouse with a film that mixes gore and gags with gleeful abandon. More please.

### Alice, Sweet Alice (All-region BD)



88 Films unearths another underrated horror classic in the form of this 1976 proto-slasher.

### My Generation (Region B BD)



Let Michael Caine be your guide to London in the Swinging '60s with this enjoyable documentary.

**At the 'plex...**

Heading out to see a flick?  
Catch these this month

**2001: A Space Odyssey**

May 18: Kubrick's sci-fi masterpiece turns 50 this year. To celebrate, a new 4K restoration (overseen by Christopher Nolan) will be playing UK cinemas. But don't worry if you miss it, as a UHD Blu-ray is on the cards for later in the year.

**Solo: A Star Wars Story**

May 24: Lucasfilm's second *Star Wars* spin-off charts the origin of that lovable smuggler, Han Solo. Can Alden Ehrenreich live up to Harrison Ford's swaggering performance in the role?

**Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom**

June 06: Get ready for even more dinosaurs, even more mayhem and the return of Jeff Goldblum's Ian Malcolm. And while this may be the fifth film in the franchise, it's the first to be shot in a 2.40:1 ration in order to make it feel 'bigger' and more 'epic'...

# Visit a real-life VR Oasis

Netflix-style subscription service opens virtual door to games and more

VR fans will soon be able to subscribe to a Netflix-style content portal called Terra Virtua. The hub, which emulates the world depicted in the recent Steven Spielberg flick *Ready Player One*, offers headset wearers a virtual community with access to VR games and experiences, including live music concerts, e-sports events and more.

Platform support will be wide. 'We want to reduce fragmentation,' says founder Jawad Ashraf. 'We'll support Google Cardboard, Pico, Gear VR, Oculus Go and HTC Vive. Certain games lend themselves to working across multiple platforms.' And there are ways around hardware differences, he says. 'On a game like *Valkyrie*, a Gear VR will offer players a small subset designed for mobile, while Oculus users get the full singing and dancing version.'

A companion Augmented Reality app will allow subscribers to interact with the community when not fully immersed in VR goggles, and provide extra features, such as avatar customisation.

Terra Virtua is a 3D environment. Subscribers enter a lobby, where they'll be able to interact with others who are present. The system uses VoIP for real-time chat.

The portal will launch with a mix of familiar VR titles and new content. 'We've got a lot of games titles signed up, with more being created exclusively for us,' explains Ashraf. 'This includes a whole series of escape room games. In *Museum Heist*, you can work with all your friends to solve the whodunit.'

Launch partners include Epic Games, Cooperative Innovations and MakeReal. The Unreal Engine is being used to build the Terra Virtua environment.



**Jawad Ashraf:** 'It's about experiences and not just games. We're talking to interactive story makers, moviemakers and the BBC'

All games and assets will use a blockchain-style economy based around TVT 'Terra' tokens. The company says cryptocurrency

will change the way gamers use in-game rewards; dedicated zones within Terra Virtua can also be purchased using TVT tokens in order to host content, and creators will be paid in Terra tokens.

**Slow going for VR**

Ashraf acknowledges that VR hasn't quite lived up to expectations. A recent push to install VR cinemas in China faltered, with many now closed, he reveals.

'We want to take the journey and see where we end up. With wearables, everyone gave up after one year. VR hasn't seen the growth everyone wanted, but there's more hardware coming to the market. We think VR will end up as a new form of entertainment.'

He adds that it's not just an issue of image resolution (existing VR platforms are quite low-res). 'For us it's not about the fidelity. Consoles chased better and better fidelity, but that did not make for better games. I remember playing *Manic Miner* on the ZX Spectrum for hours. It's about gameplay and how you leverage the hardware.'

At present, no subscription fee has been announced, although Ashraf suggests Terra Virtua will cost between \$10-\$15 a month. The VR world will open its doors in September.

**Terra Virtua is built around the Unreal game engine**



## JVC joins DLP party for 4K

New, compact LX-UH1 marks a change in brand's PJ strategy

JVC, which has used its proprietary D-ILA projector technology across its product range for more than 10 years, has switched to a Texas Instruments' DLP design for a new affordable 4K model, the LX-UH1.

Priced at £2,500, this HDR-compatible beamer joins projectors from Optoma, Vivitek, Acer, BenQ and more in the increasingly crowded entry-level UHD market.

The LX-UH1 is available now in either black or white finishes, and offers setup flexibility via a 1.6x zoom, vertical and horizontal lens shift, and 12V trigger and RS-232 connections. Of the unit's twin

HDMI inputs, one is HDCP 2.2-capable and supports data transfer rates up to 18Gbps.

Brightness output is claimed to be 2,000 Lumens. The PJ's RGBRGB colour wheel delivers 100 per cent of the REC.709 colour space, while REC.2020 content is remapped.

A Dynamic Contrast figure of 100:000:1, achieved via the LX-UH1's two-position automatic aperture, is touted as ideal for HDR playback. [www.uk.jvc.com](http://www.uk.jvc.com)

**The LX-UH1 measures a manageable 330mm wide**





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Small items that could make a big impression...

**All the Colours of Sergio Martino**

With more and more of Sergio Martino's films finding their way to Blu-ray

on these shores, film critic Kat Ellinger's study of the Italian auteur's colourful career is especially welcome. Erudite and engaging, this fascinating book is a must-read for fans of both the filmmaker himself and of Italian exploitation cinema in general. Pick up a copy now, priced £20.

**Star Wars Droid Inventor Kit**

Priced around £100, littleBit's customisable build-your-own R2-D2 kit is a great way for kids (and adults) to learn about computer coding and robotics – and with a fresh upgrade allowing users to code and program their droid via drag-and-drop Scratch Blocks functionality, it just got even better. It's the sort of thing that could give educational toys a good name...

**Marvel Studios: All Your Questions Answered**

Have 10 years of the MCU left you struggling to remember why Iron Man and Captain America don't

get along or what S.H.I.E.L.D. was? Then DK's £13 guide is here to help with its comprehensive, yet easy to digest, info on characters and events from the MCU movies, up to and including *Black Panther*.

# Freeview TV gets retuned

Government support offered to households with missing channels



**Twenty years since the start of UK digital broadcasting, some TV viewers have complained that certain terrestrial channels – BBC Four HD and BBC News 24 HD in particular – have gone AWOL.**

Their absence is often followed by an onscreen message inviting viewers to retune their 'TV or box', or call a Freeview Advice Line. Yet in some areas a retune does not reinstate the absent services.

So what's going on? Following digital switchover, the UHF TV broadcast band is in the process of being reorganised so another chunk of the spectrum can be auctioned to telecoms companies planning to offer 5G services. Some UHF spectrum (frequencies around 800MHz) has already gone – to 4G back in 2013 – but telecoms is encroaching still further into one-time TV territory.

An auction for the UHF spectrum currently being cleared is scheduled to take place next year – the lower frequencies (700MHz or so) could be better for providing mobile broadband in rural areas. Ofcom told *HCC* it has not predicted how much this sale will raise – but some of this money will be needed to restore the TV reception of affected viewers.

**Multiplex management**

In the UK, digital TV and radio services are slotted into 'multiplexes' carried on a single UHF channel of 8MHz bandwidth. Digital multiplexes were responsible for the mushrooming of viewing choice; in the analogue era, one of these 8MHz channels was occupied by a single TV service. There are 49 of these UHF channels, numbered 21-69 and corresponding to frequencies between 470MHz and 860MHz – the upper ones are, or will be, lost to broadcast TV. Some multiplexes will move to different frequencies as part of this clearance process, hence those 'please retune' messages.

The recently affected Crystal Palace TV transmitters, which serve London and the South-East, are an example. One of the Crystal Palace multiplexes (called 'COM7') changed frequency on March 7 from UHF channel 33 to a new home on UHF channel 55. COM7 carries HD channels like BBC News HD, 4seven HD and Channel 4+1 HD.

As the frequency has changed, logic dictates that retuning your TV will restore reception. But this doesn't always work – and for an explanation we need to refer to history.

Years ago the UHF TV band was split into several overlapping groups. In the 1960s, each region's TV services were allocated to a specific group, to prevent the transmitters of adjacent regions from interfering with each other. A 'rigger' needed to erect an aerial tuned to the appropriate group, which would give its best results on these channels.

Subsequently, wideband – also known as 'Group W' – aerials were introduced. These don't have the same gain as an aerial of equivalent size, optimised for reception of a narrower group. But they were useful for those living in areas where services from multiple regions could be received.

Originally, Crystal Palace viewers needed a Group A aerial, but the move of its COM7 multiplex to channel 55 puts it in Group C/D territory, outside the frequencies for which a Group A aerial is optimised. Those with Group A aerials may need to replace them with a Group W aerial (or its post-switchover Group T equivalent) for full reception to be restored. The COM8 multiplex, which carries channels like BBC Four HD and PBS America, is also affected.

There's a chance viewers may miss the onscreen messages, as these are delivered on SD channels. They are, however, part of a wider campaign about the changes – see [www.freeview.co.uk/support](http://www.freeview.co.uk/support).

Extra help is also at hand to those affected. Ken Hunt from the Department of Media, Culture and Sport told *HCC* that a £600m government kitty is available – the caveat being you only have three months, following the loss of channels, to register your interest via the Freeview Advice Line. If none of the obvious possibilities bring back your services, Freeview will book a technician to deal with the problem free of charge. Aerials and equipment will be installed/replaced if necessary.

Ofcom expects that 'around one per cent' of aerials will need to be replaced or repointed during the clearance programme. A 'platform change to free-to-air satellite' may also be discussed.



## This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



**1 London's new luxury cinema**  
National Amusements is bringing its luxury cinema brand – Showcase Cinema de Lux – to London for the first time. Announced as part of the regeneration of the Brent Cross Shopping Centre, the 1,800-seat, 80,000ft<sup>2</sup> cinema complex will house 12 auditoriums and promises 'cutting-edge audio-visual technology as standard in every screen.' Just what that entails has yet to be revealed, but as the Showcase Cinema de Lux that opened in Southampton last year boasts Barco laser projection and Dolby Atmos sonics, we expect more of the same.

**2 Ikea audio**  
Home furnishings giant Ikea has jumped into the Bluetooth speaker market with two compact models: the 20W Eneby 20 and 42W Eneby 30, priced £45 and £80, respectively. Thankfully, unlike most Ikea products, you don't have to put these together yourself.

**3 Rakuten's free 4K upgrade**  
VOD service Rakuten TV is following in the footsteps of iTunes and allowing users to upgrade selected films that they have already purchased in Full HD to 4K for free. Rakuten has also revealed that the World War II thriller *Hurricane* will launch on the platform day-and-date with a UK cinema release this September.

**4 Fuller up!**  
Maverick US filmmaker Samuel Fuller will be the subject of Indicator's next Blu-ray boxset. Arriving on June 18 and limited to 6,000 copies, *Samuel Fuller at Columbia, 1937-1961* collects together seven of his films (*It Happened in Hollywood*, *Adventure in Sahara*, *Power of the Press*, *Shockproof*, *Scandal Sheet*, *The Crimson Kimono* and *Underworld U.S.A.*), plus a bevy of bonus goodies.

**5 Fancy an Uprising?**  
If your idea of fun is watching giant mechs fighting giant monsters, then you'll be thrilled to learn that the action-packed sci-fi sequel *Pacific Rim: Uprising* is set to explode onto 4K Blu-ray, 3D Blu-ray, Blu-ray and DVD in the UK on July 30.

**6 Last Jedi grabs first place**  
*The Last Jedi* has enjoyed 2018's biggest first week sales in the UK, shifting 582,000 units in seven days (comfortably beating previous title holder *Paddington 2*'s 315,000 units). However, it's still some way short of *The Force Awakens*, which did a record-breaking 1.25m units in its first week on sale. Meanwhile, Disney's *Avengers: Infinity War* has smashed the global opening weekend record at cinemas, earning a massive \$640m.

**7 BBC passes 4K challenge**  
The BBC ran its first live 4K HDR iPlayer test broadcast in late April, streaming a rugby league Challenge Cup match between the York City Knights and Catalans Dragons via the iPlayer beta app. The successful test has raised hopes that the BBC will be offering selected live FIFA World Cup matches in 4K this Summer.

**8 Frightful sponsors**  
Arrow Video will be the headline sponsor of FrightFest 2018 after the distributor signed a one-year deal with the popular horror film festival. Described as 'the Woodstock of Gore' by director Guillermo Del Toro, FrightFest 2018 takes place between August 23 and 27, at London's Cineworld Leicester Square and Prince Charles cinemas.

**9 Netflix invests in Europe**  
With Netflix claiming that its international subscriptions will soon surpass those in the US for the very first time, it comes as little surprise that the VOD service has announced it plans to spend \$1bn (double that of 2017) on producing original European content this year.

**10 Back in black**  
Bang & Olufsen has introduced a new limited edition piano black finish for its BeoSound 1 wireless speaker. If that sounds a little dull, B&O is keen to point out that the speaker has been polished and anodized many times to 'achieve a mesmerising reflective surface in pure black that draws the eye to its geometric design and converging silhouette'. Okay, we're tempted.



## Premiere...

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

### Ashes to ashes



After three seasons on the air, Starz has pulled the plug on its horror-comedy series *Ash vs. Evil Dead*. While fans quickly campaigned for other networks to pick up the show, actor Bruce Campbell soon quashed any such efforts stating that he has now 'retired as Ash'. Not groovy.

### Solo not a solo job

Looks like the adventures of the young Han Solo won't end with *Solo: A Star Wars Story* after leading man Alden Ehrenreich revealed that he's signed on for three films. Is anybody else hoping a Boba Fett movie will be one of them?

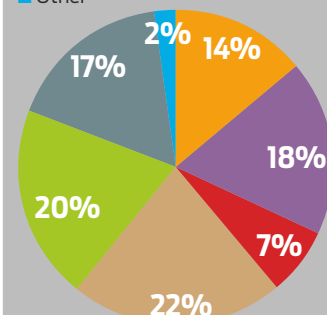
### Ryan back for seconds

Amazon has renewed its *Jack Ryan* TV series for a second season, even though the first season won't debut on its Prime platform until August. Amazon's confidence in *Jack Ryan* was boosted by a 400 per cent increase in Prime members adding the show to their watchlist following an ad that ran during the Super Bowl.

## We asked...

Which brand of AVR do you use in your home cinema system?

■ Arcam 
 ■ Denon 
 ■ Marantz 
 ■ Onkyo 
 ■ Pioneer 
 ■ Yamaha 
 ■ Other



Results from [www.homecinemachoice.com](http://www.homecinemachoice.com)  
Go online for more polling action



# Wakandan warrior

Black Panther → Walt Disney → DVD/Blu-ray/  
3D Blu-ray/Ultra HD Blu-ray

After making his debut in 2016's *Captain America: Civil War*, Marvel's Wakandan superhero Black Panther was given a solo film earlier this year – and it smashed nearly every box office record going. *Black Panther* now makes its UK disc debut on June 11 (with 4K and 3D options), joined by Marvel's usual slate of bonuses including a director's commentary, six featurettes, four deleted scenes and a gag reel. The Ultra HD platter upgrades the audio from DTS-HD MA 7.1 to Dolby Atmos.





VPL-VW760ES

4K

 TRILUMINOS  
DISPLAYSXRD  
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- 4K Motionflow and Reality Creation

## Face to Face

Topics of discussion on the HCC Facebook page

### What's your favourite Marvel movie?



Now it's *Avengers: Infinity War*!  
Troy Chaske

*Iron Man 2*.  
Simon Sharpe

Those before and including the first *Avengers*. All after that got worse in terms of story, and the newer ones have compressed soundmixes!  
Frank Hansen

No answer as every new Marvel movie is getting better.  
Martin Skinner

It was the first *Avengers* film, but the new *Infinity War* movie has blown everything away! It's quite simply incredible.  
Dan Ryan

### What you're watching on your home cinema...



Will finish *Lost in Space*, then might give *Terminator: Genisys* 4K a spin, all the while mourning the demise of Oppo!  
John Dennis

Start *The Revolution Without Me*, *Skyjacked*, and *Otley*.  
Walter White

*Alien Covenant* and *Prometheus* – to my mind still the two best *Alien* movies made.  
Steve Michael Clark

*Geostorm* on Blu-ray. *Lost in Space* on Netflix.  
Andy McPartland

*Wolf Warrior 2* on Netflix. Very enjoyable!  
Adrian Nauntun

*Oblivion*.  
Dirk de Sagher

Arrow's *Blade Of The Immortal*.  
Alex Russell



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# Back of the 'net

Trailers, technology and more to check out on the web



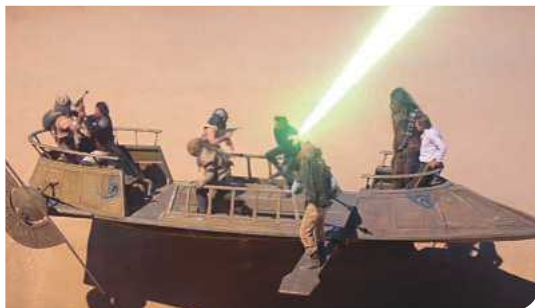
## All things being equal

Sony Pictures has remembered it has *The Equalizer 2* on its slate this August and finally released a trailer. The first film in the series let Denzel Washington cut loose as the brutally efficient ex-spook turned do-gooder and was surprisingly fun. Can Washington and director Antoine Fuqua deliver the goods again?  
[youtu.be/KQKtSekSi94](https://youtu.be/KQKtSekSi94)



## We really need a bigger boat

The full trailer for Warner Bros' massive shark flick *The Meg* has now surfaced in advance of its August cinema release. Admittedly, this doesn't look likely to acquire *Jaws* levels of classic status, but as long as the CG effects hold water and leading man Jason Statham gets to throw some punches we'll be happy.  
[youtu.be/UtiRWYrfqUU](https://youtu.be/UtiRWYrfqUU)



## Laser Moon returns...

After five years, comedic team The Auralnauts have finally completed their epic *Star Wars* parody re-edit. The sixth and final instalment in the saga, *The Last Laser Master*, reworks footage from *Return of the Jedi* to serve up a whopping 51 minutes of side-splitting gags and three brand-new musical numbers.  
[youtu.be/3ynmC1-YAECm](https://youtu.be/3ynmC1-YAECm)



## The great outdoors

The Nomad Cinema, which screens fan-favourite flicks in unusual outdoor locations, has kicked off its Summer season. Titles due for an outing in 2018 include *Some Like it Hot*, *The Goonies*, *The Shape of Water* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. All profits go to environmental charity The Sustainability Institute.  
[www.wherethenomad.com](http://www.wherethenomad.com)



TOP PICK

## Pioneer plays tease

Lurking on Pioneer's Japanese website, under the tag 'BDLX', is this teaser image that hints at a new heavyweight 4K Blu-ray player. Gyouten is the Kanji character for 'dawn' ...as in a new dawn for Blu-ray. How long do we have to wait for Pioneer to lift off that blue cover sheet?  
<http://jp.pioneer-audiovisual.com/bdlx>



## The PJ you're looking for?

Reminding us a bit of R2-D2, the Keecker is a roaming home entertainment system, integrating a short-throw 1080p projector (able to aim at a wall or ceiling), quartet of speakers and a hidden subwoofer. Move it around via the smartphone app, give it voice commands, ask it to help battle the Empire...  
[www.keecker.com/uk-en](http://www.keecker.com/uk-en)



# X marks the Spotify

Ruark Audio MRx → [www.ruarkaudio.com](http://www.ruarkaudio.com)



A switchable stand  
allows for vertical or  
horizontal placement

The £400 MRx sees UK audio corp Ruark add Wi-Fi/Ethernet hookup to a standalone speaker for the first time, ushering in 'net radio and streaming audio integration (including Spotify Connect), plus multiroom possibilities with other MRx units or Ruark's R2 and R7 systems. The speaker is available in walnut or soft grey finishes, and features an LED-lit control dial amidst its cloth grille. Full-range drivers in a stereo configuration are powered by Class AB amplification.



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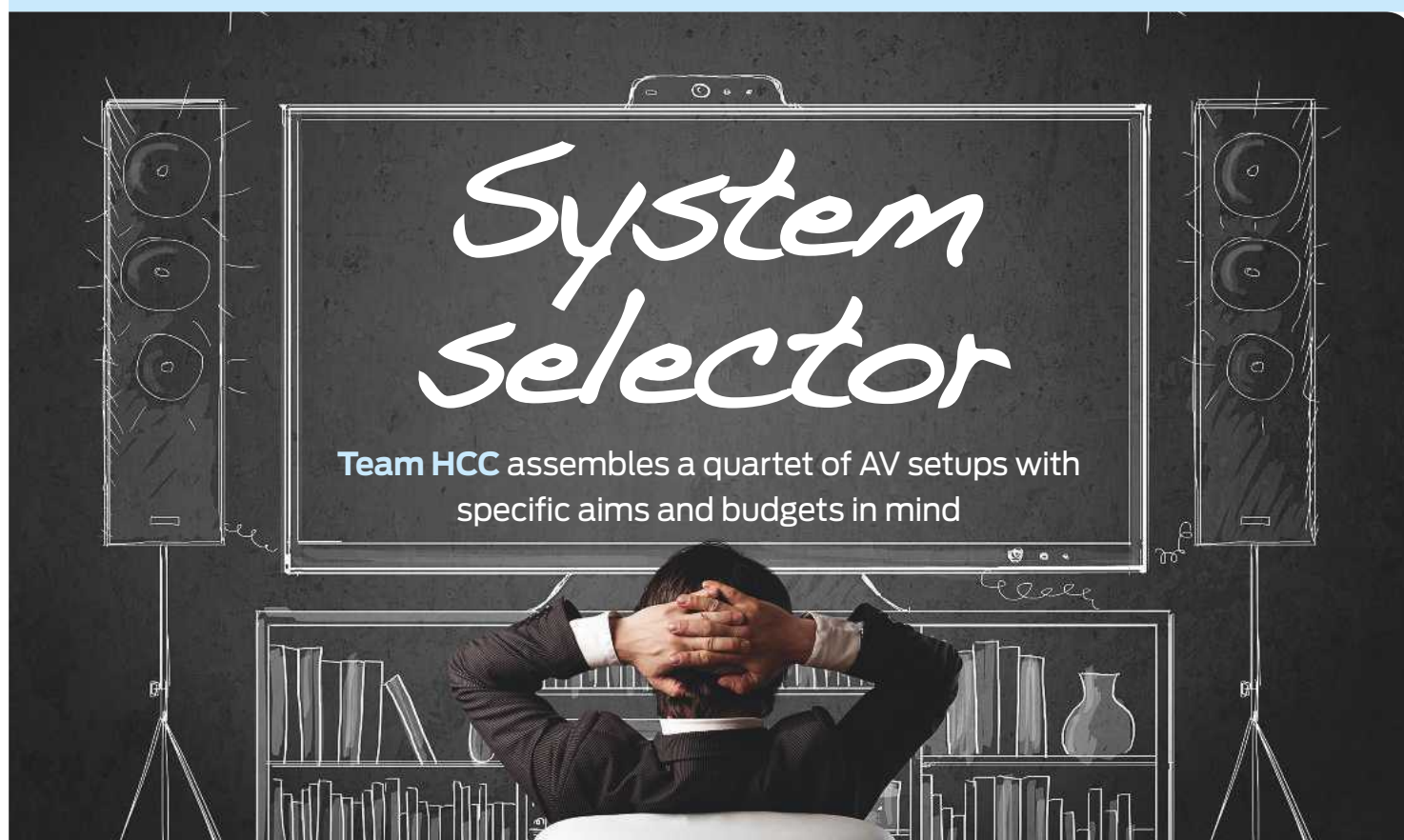
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## £1,000 beginner's system – built by Mark Craven

**WANT A 4K-READY**, surround sound setup for only £1,000? It's possible – sort of. I've ended up going a little over budget (more on that later), but managed to assemble a solid system that will deliver the goods with UHD Blu-rays.

Trying to hit that £1,000 target means there isn't much scope for peripheral bits, so I've focused on a player, display and AVR-driven speaker array. With a tight budget, I've had to pinch pennies somewhere, and I've started with the 4K disc-spinner.

Panasonic's DMP-UB300 launched in 2017 with a £250 price tag, but is now widely available for £130. At that price, it goes straight in my trolley.

This is very much a budget player, with a compact chassis and no front-panel display. It doesn't stock the typical dual HDMI output, offering just a single connector, and packs no Wi-Fi connectivity. Neither is it particularly well-served when it comes to streaming apps, although there is 4K Netflix and Amazon Video onboard. Yet this affordable deck shares the same core processing as Panasonic's more feature-rich models, and functions admirably as a 4K BD player (and media player, too).

For a TV, I'm looking away from OLED and high-spec LED models and shopping in the mass-market aisles. Here, there's plenty of variety, and it throws up a key question: is size the most important buying consideration?

Personally, I don't think so. There's been a lot of discussion around optimum viewing distances for 4K TVs, but my experience has shown you don't always have to look at 55in or above to see a noticeable improvement in pixel clarity. I'm more interested in a



Yamaha's RX-V483 is a 5.1-channel model with 4K HDR passthrough

We've matched Panasonic's budget UB300 player with Samsung's mid-range 49MU6400 Ultra HD TV



decent all-round set that can convince with HDR as well as 3,840 x 2,160 resolution.

My initial hope was that Samsung's excellent 49MU7000, soon to be replaced by 2018 models, would have had a hefty price cut, but as this still retails for £730 it's not an option unless I curtail my 5.1 audio ambitions. Samsung's step-down model, the 49MU6400, is therefore much more enticing at £520.

You shouldn't expect QLED-style luminance or OLED-esque black levels from this 49in screen, but Samsung has been proficient at maintaining good image quality at these lower reaches, helped by the use of whole-frame LED dimming, as opposed to a basic local dimming implementation that might

*System:*  
 Panasonic DMP-UB300: £130  
 Samsung UE49MU6400: £520  
 Yamaha RX-V483/  
 JBL Cinema 510:  
 £439  
 Total: £1,089



introduce lighting flaws. This set also has the video-on-demand options (including UK catchup TV platforms) that my Blu-ray player lacks.

To get a 5.1 speaker/AVR combi I've shot past my £1,000 budget a little. Retailer Richer Sounds demands £439 for a home cinema system partnering Yamaha's RX-V483 with JBL's compact Cinema 510 sub/sat package. This gives me additional HDMI connectivity should I want to hookup other sources in the future, and the option



**The Cinema 510: not as potent as a JBL Synthesis system, but not as expensive either...**

of upgrading either the AVR or speakers independently of one another. Naturally, if discrete surround isn't a necessity, and an easier to install system is preferable, a soundbar or soundbase speaker could be swapped here. Canton's excellent DM75 would fit the bill, and at £300 would bring me back in under budget. But I'd be missing out on the HDMI switching, flexibility and genuine 5.1 audio the Yamaha/JBL package provides.

## £3,500 4K projection system – built by Steve May

**WE'VE WITNESSED SEISMIC** changes in the home cinema market of late, with the arrival of lower-cost UHD projectors, a proliferation of Dolby Atmos AVRs and a plethora of 4K sources. All great news if you want to supersize your entertainment. For this bigscreen proposal, I've set aside £3,500 with the aim of creating a wonderwall that offers the best AV for the budget, using UHD Blu-ray as the main source, augmented by a streaming option.

My chosen PJ is the Optoma UHD51 (reviewed next issue), which at £1,400 is one of the new breed of compact, HDR-capable 4K DLP beamers that don't break the bank – and if you've been bemoaning the disappearance of 3D from TVs, this PJ keeps that door open. Images are bright, thanks to a 2,400 Lumens output, while Optoma's so-called Amazing Colour image processing adds extra zing. Throw ratio is a reasonable 1.21-1.59:1.

Optoma also sells a simple, manual pull-down 92in 16:9 screen with a self-locking mechanism, the DS-9092PWC, for just £178.

My Blu-ray player is equally good value. Now available for a paltry £280, the Sony UBP-X800 combines high-end build quality with a commanding AV performance. Image quality is superb with both native 4K and standard Blu-rays, and it supports hi-res audio codecs and SACD/DVD-A playback.

This player has a selection of 4K streaming services integrated into its user interface, but not all support HDR. So for the widest content choice, I'm partnering it with an £80 Amazon Fire TV dongle. The latest iteration offers 4K HDR from both Amazon's own Prime service and Netflix, alongside an extensive collection of catch-up TV portals and other streaming diversions. It also boasts Alexa voice search, smart interaction and Amazon's X-ray metadata system.

At the heart of this setup is Sony's STR-DN1080, an AVR with outstanding functionality. All six HDMI inputs are 4K HDR compatible; there are two HDMI outputs, should you fancy adding a TV to this system; and in addition to Ethernet and Wi-Fi, there's Bluetooth, Airplay and Chromecast built-in.

This is a fast, responsive performer that really throws you into the action. Its seven channels can power a Dolby Atmos 5.1.2 configuration and, rather neatly, it also creates phantom rears to aid the illusion of full wraparound surround.

You'll find the STR-DN1080 bundled with a few different speaker packages by retailers, giving you a cost saving. I've gone for a system from Sevenoaks Sound & Vision, using Focal's Sib Evo Dolby Atmos array, for £1,400. This 5.1.2 speaker pack revamps the sub/sat norm for the Atmos generation, adding upfiring drivers to the front left/right enclosures, joined by a neat-looking subwoofer and satellites for surround and centre channel. Audio is articulate but punchy, the Atmos effect impressive, and the cabinets don't completely take over your room.

I'm left with £162 still in my kitty – handy for discs, subscription fees and plenty of popcorn.

**Optoma's UHD51 is primed for 4K streaming and BD sources**



*System:*  
Optoma UHD51: £1,400  
Optoma DS-9092PWC: £178  
Sony UBP-X800: £280  
Amazon Fire TV: £80  
Sony STR-DN1080/Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2: £1,400  
Total: £3,338



**Two of Focal's satellites feature Atmos upfiring drivers**

## £5,000 premium flatscreen system – built by John Archer

**FOR MANY FANS** of cutting-edge home cinema, the arrival of HDR has tipped the balance away from projectors and back towards largescreen TVs. Modern TVs are just that much more equipped to deal with HDR efficiently, particularly when it comes to brightness and colour.

With this in mind, I've used my £5,000 budget to put together an all-singing, all-dancing home cinema system built around a flatscreen, and bolstered it with as many uncompromising HDR-enabled sources as I can cram in without blowing the budget.

I was torn between two TVs for this system, actually. On the LCD side, there are Samsung's stunning new Q9FN models. These use direct LED lighting, local dimming technology and wide colour gamut panels to deliver the most all-round exciting HDR pictures I've seen. However, I could only squeeze one of these into my budget if I went for a 55in screen (see page 64). And I wanted to go larger.

Cue the 65in 4K OLED65C7 from LG.

With LG's (much more expensive) 2018 OLED models just arriving, the 2017 65C7 is now available at a discount price of just £2,800 – outstanding value for such an excellent performer.

The benefits of OLED tech are well known. Its ability to illuminate each pixel means the 65C7 can show the deepest black colour in HDR's expanded contrast range adjacent to peak whites without any light pollution between the two. This stunning contrast means OLED's 4K HDR playback remains beautifully immersive and vivid, despite native brightness being about half that of the best LCD TVs.

And the OLED65C7 boasts a premium HDR trick Samsung's Q9FNs do not: support for Dolby Vision (DV). Play a Dolby Vision 4K Blu-ray or 4K stream into the LG OLED and it will provide the TV with scene-by-scene data to help it optimise its pictures.

The screen's Dolby Vision support dictates two of the hardware sources I've picked for my system. First, the Apple TV 4K streaming box not only supports DV playback, but delivers a strong selection of DV-encoded 4K movies via iTunes that cost no more than Apple's HD titles.

Sony's excellent UBP-X700, meanwhile, is one of only a handful of 4K Blu-ray players that supports (following an upcoming firmware update) Dolby Vision discs as well as industry standard HDR10 platters. You could, I suppose, manage without a 4K Blu-ray player if you get an Apple TV 4K. But good though the Apple hardware is, for the ultimate in picture and sound quality nothing beats a disc.

My other essential 4K HDR source is the Xbox One X. It was a tough choice between this and the PS4 Pro, but the One X has the edge on sheer graphics grunt and high-end AV features, delivering the ultimate gaming experience. It also has a 4K Blu-ray player, actually, so if you can live without Dolby Vision you could rely on the Xbox One X for

disc duties and do without the Sony player. But it's not the most elegant solution, nor as accomplished.

Another key AV advantage the Xbox One X offers over the PS4 Pro is Dolby Atmos object-based sound while gaming. To unlock the potential of this feature I've finished my £5,000 system off with Samsung's impressive, HDMI-equipped HW-K950.

This powerful soundbar package provides Atmos bitstream decoding, and unlike most rivals it backs this up with a subwoofer and wireless rear speakers featuring both upfiring and front-firing drivers, for a 5.1.4 configuration. It delivers a better sense of three-dimensional sound than any other soundbar I've heard to date. Could I have opted for a more traditional AVR and speaker ensemble? Yes, but none would be as unobtrusive as the Samsung 'bar, and more expensive if the same number of channels is desired. Note, however, that the HW-K950 doesn't pass Dolby Vision through its HDMI loopthrough, so in this setup I'd need to use the UBP-X700's audio-only HDMI output to feed the 'bar while sending video direct to the TV.

In all, this system is slick, smart and primed for 4K HDR – you'll never feel the need to leave the house again.

*System:*  
**LG OLED65C7:**  
 £2,800  
**Sony UBP-X700:**  
 £230  
**Apple TV 4K:** £200  
**Microsoft Xbox One X:** £400  
**Samsung HW-K950:**  
 £1,200  
**Total:** £4,830

**The Xbox One X outguns the PS4 by delivering Dolby Atmos gaming**



**LG's OLED65C7 – now available for a tempting £2,800**



**There are upfiring drivers in both Samsung's main bar and wireless surround speakers**





## £25,000 largescale AV system – built by Richard Stevenson

**WITH £25,000 TO** blow wantonly on a serious home cinema system (although last time we did this I was given a £1m budget, so I'm a little miffed), where should your cash go? Do you go big on the bigscreen, deep on the deep bass or make your AVR star of the show? With this sort of budget, you want to do all three. Let's start with the visuals.

My first thought was to try and incorporate Sony's remarkable VPL-VW760ES 4K laser projector, but that would have cramped my AV style elsewhere. So the same company's VPL-VW360ES becomes my PJ of choice. At £7,000, it's half the price of its sibling, but still dazzles with its UHD Blu-ray delivery. Flexible installation features (including an expansive throw ratio) and reasonably quiet running make it a great cinema projector.

A partnering screen is less easy to choose. There are premium options, offering automated masking tricks, curved surfaces or 4K-optimised material, but these are a) mainly the preserve of the custom install industry, b) not cheap and c) rarely available on the second-hand market. Still, a dedicated screen is key in this setup – I want to give my image the edge that a lick of brilliant-white emulsion on the wall just won't offer. Vutec's Elegante 123 (a 123in model) available through Richer Sounds for £1,000 would fit the bill, with its velvet-wrapped fixed frame looking suitably lux. An alternative at the same price would be Optoma's ALR100, which is designed to punch out a bright picture even in rooms with plenty of ambient light. Worth considering if you want to do plenty of day-to-day TV viewing on your bigscreen.

This budget isn't oligarch enough for an AV processor and multiple power amplifier combination, but I have more than nine channels in mind so the next best thing is Denon's fabulous AVC-X8500H. At just £3,300, this cutting-edge, 13-channel AV amplifier is a bit of a steal. It is bursting with features and has wide-ranging ability to fine tune your setup via Audyssey's MultEQ XT32 suite. Its sound is both powerhouse and sophisticated, making it a superb all-rounder.

What speakers to get? Well, that is tricky, as there is no shortage of options available within my budget. I could happily spend a week demoing different systems, so I've decided to work backwards a little.



For 4K HDR projection, Sony's VPL-VW360ES is hard to beat



Focal's Aria 936 floorstanders are on L/R duty in this 9.1.4 system, driven by Denon's 13-channel AVC-X8500H amp



The Denon amp supports a range of setup options, and I'm certain I want in-ceiling overheads, plus two front height processed channels (9.1.4). This would give a wraparound soundfield and lift dialogue nicely into the middle of my 100in screen. Having been very impressed by Focal's 300 ICW 8 models [see p52], I considered these, but have opted for the smaller ICW 6 variants to save a bit and make for a more discreet installation.

These feature the same Flax drivers as in Focal's Aria series, so completing the system with an Aria array will deliver a timbre-matched sound. The speakers also feature sumptuous good looks and a compact footprint. I've opted for Aria 936 towers at the front, two pairs of the standmount 906s for surround and rear duties and the Aria CC900 centre.

At £6,500, REL's No.25 subwoofer costs slightly more than all my other speakers combined. Yet its sheer scale and ability to generate realistic home cinema thunder (it drops insanely deep) are well worth the outlay. It's ideal for a largeroom setup.

As for source equipment, with Oppo pulling out of the BD market and Panasonic's flagship disc-spinner still awaited, I'm drawn to both Sony's UBP-X800 or Cambridge Audio's CXUHD (£700). As the latter takes me right up against my budget and I'm not in need of its Dolby Vision playback, I've swung around in favour of the more affordable Sony. I'll also be less bothered about getting rid of this deck in the future should I want to upgrade.

With my remaining £520, I can tackle all the speaker wire I'm going to need... ■



*System:*  
 Sony VPL-VW360ES: £7,000  
 Vutec Elegante 123: £1,000  
 Denon AVC-X8500H: £3,300  
 Focal Aria 7.0 system: £4,300  
 Focal ICW 6 (x 6): £2,100  
 REL No.25: £6,500  
 Sony UBP-X800: £280  
 Total: £24,480

# 'It might be a but you can't



# on a disc people

**Ben Stoddart**, Business and Operations Manager at the BFI, discusses its new Blu-ray boxset celebrating British studio Woodfall Films – and much more. Questions: **Anton van Beek**

**The Woodfall boxset features key films from British New Wave cinema, films that many people will recognise the names of – and yet people don't necessarily know the Woodfall name. Why?**

That's a very valid point. One of the key things that we are trying to address is that this is very much a celebration of Woodfall. It's Woodfall's 60th anniversary. And there is quite a lot of variety amongst it, there's a lot of mixture in there.

I think people often associate distributors and production companies with making the same kind of film consistently. You know what to expect, because that's what they do. The modern day example is

Marvel. I think the reason DC seems a bit all over the place is that Marvel has this incredible consistency; you know exactly what you're going to get. You don't expect to get thrown a curveball when you go to see a Marvel film.

What was brilliant about Woodfall, but which also means that it's maybe not as well known as it should be as a company, is that it really mixed it up. You look at *Look Back in Anger* in 1959 and then you look at *Tom Jones* just four years later, and they're radically different. One's black-and-white and about the working-class, then you've got this quite bawdy, Technicolor film about completely different types of characters. Albert Finney in *Tom Jones* and Richard Burton in *Look Back in Anger* are not comparable.



Before joining the BFI, Stoddart worked at pioneering independent distributor Tartan Films



# 4K master, just slap it



# and charge £15 for it...

Yet there's only a few years between those films, and it's the same company and the same director [Tony Richardson].

Because of that Woodfall doesn't have a real identity. It wanted to do different things. It wanted to challenge different areas. Tony Richardson wanted to make different kinds of films. I think it was Vanessa Redgrave who said that Richardson showed England as it was, from top to bottom.

That's why this boxset, this entire thing, is important. It's shining a light on Woodfall and its importance in British cinema. I think you've got to go back to Ealing for a production house, a studio, that had a real impact that changed British cinema quite as much. While both made very successful films, Ealing Studios had a more recognisable 'brand' of sorts.

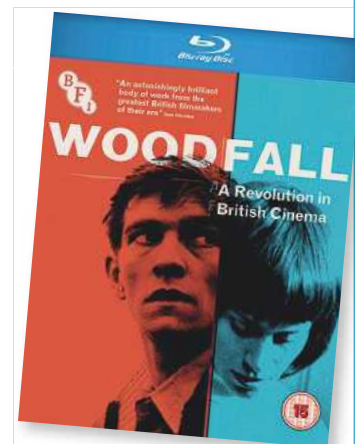
A lot of the films were previously distributed by MGM, and one of the reasons this boxset has

happened now is because Woodfall has bought the films back. One of the key things was that it wanted to safeguard its films; to make sure they were treated properly, and to get them restored. Apart from *Red White and Zero* (digitised by the BFI as part of Unlocking Film Heritage) and *The Knack... and How to Get It*, which MGM scanned, there were no HD masters available.

***The Hotel New Hampshire* [1984] isn't in the boxset. Is that because the rights weren't available, or some other reason?**

At the time that we were in discussion with Woodfall it wasn't available. There wasn't a very good master of it; it wasn't one of the ones that they'd gone back and restored yet.

Woodfall is continuing its pursuit of other films it produced, which are predominantly with MGM, >



**Woodfall: A Revolution in British Cinema** is released on Blu-ray on June 11



BFI Player is home to hours of free, archival British content, plus subscription on-demand movies

including that one I think. If it can do a similar kind of deal and get those films back under the Woodfall banner, it would be free to go and really look at them from a technical perspective. And if that happens, then they could potentially be made available – and I know Woodfall is very keen for us to do more.

On a personal level, I would love to do *Charge of the Light Brigade*. It's a very troubled film, in the sense that there are lots of different cuts that happened to it. The DVD that the BFI released [2004], before my time, was not good. It was then done by StudioCanal and that wasn't that great either. A lot of the cuts to it have been about horse-tripping and things like that, which are always going to be cut by the BBFC, unless you can provide evidence that wasn't the case. But it's a bit of a minefield, and I think it's one that would benefit from being really investigated properly. I suspect there are other materials around; I'd love to know what Woodfall may hold on that film in its own archive.

### Would you include different cuts, or simply go for the most complete version?

I would always endeavour to present different cuts, if they are available. We're doing that with *Tom Jones*, which Criterion has done in the States and we're taking the same approach in our boxset of offering both cuts. Incidentally both have now been passed uncut by the BBFC for the first time.

### For major studios, home entertainment release schedules are fairly straightforward. How does the BFI decide which titles to pursue for release?

There are often quite a lot of suggestions from around the organisation. But it's changing now, to a degree, where there's a desire to try and do quite BFI-wide projects. That's to say, something happening at BFI Southbank, something that can then also be exploited on BFI Player, as well as on DVD and Blu-ray. It's about looking at projects that can tick all of those boxes. You can give something a massive push if you've got everyone pulling in the same direction and backing the same project.

*The Hotel New Hampshire*, based on John Irving's 1981 novel, was Woodfall Films' last production



This was something that really worked when we did the Alan Clarke boxset in 2016 [see HCC #261]. The DVD/Blu-ray department was the lead on the project, and then other parts of the BFI asked if they could get onboard with it. BFI Southbank did a whole season, which allowed them to show some material that we weren't going to be able to include in the boxset. And we were able to do stuff on BFI Player.

We've always been linked to what BFI Southbank is doing, we never see ourselves as a separate entity that just does whatever we want to do, but the Clarke boxset made us wonder if we couldn't do it more. It's very difficult with a lot of stuff, because with a lot of seasons at BFI Southbank there just aren't the films available for us to licence.

For example, when we had a Jean-Pierre Melville season there, these were films we used to have on DVD many years ago, but they're now at StudioCanal. I wish we still had them in the catalogue, but you can't just go and get those films back again. We couldn't do anything to majorly tie-in with that season.

### What about the mix of feature film and documentary material?

Personally I think we should be looking at a third non-fiction, a third British fiction and a third international. Sometimes there's more of one than another; there are years when we've done a lot more British stuff than we've done in the previous year. Other times it's been more world cinema dominated. It depends on what's available to licence, what catalogues might come up. I think the year where we did Alain Robbe-Grillet, that boxset was six films, we also did the Werner Herzog set which was 18 films. So that was a lot of world cinema across just two projects.

It's all about striking a balance. I think that's a phrase that really sums up the BFI. It is sometimes about, and I hate the phrase, ticking certain boxes as well. There has to be a diversity, there has to be a good mixture of product. We can't just do studio deep-catalogue, such as someone like Powerhouse/Indicator, who I love. We couldn't do that lineup of titles because it isn't really what the BFI is about. It would just be: 'What's the BFI doing? Why are they not representing the cross-section of this country and instead doing lots of American stuff?'

### So you'll release a title that won't be a big seller and you'll follow it with something bigger to make up for any financial shortfall?

Yes. I do projections for everything we release. I'll say: 'Look, I'm not going to lie to you. I'm not going to say that these numbers aren't saying to me what they're saying to me. But I understand why it is we should be doing something like this, because we are the only ones to really do it.' And we'll do it to a level that is a very high standard.

The Derek Jarman boxset [see HCC #285] is a case in point, in a sense. Jarman is a niche filmmaker. *Caravaggio* has sold very well over the years, but that is a much more accessible film than, say, *The Angelic Conversation*. With *Caravaggio* you've got



Tilda Swinton, Dexter Fletcher and Sean Bean – actors who people will say, 'Oh, I've actually heard of these people.'

If anybody is going to do a Jarman Blu-ray boxset, with great extras and a book, then it's the BFI. I mean, he's intrinsically linked to it, having funded a lot of his films. We hold his paper collection in the BFI National Archive. So we have unprecedented access to a lot of his work.

I remember looking at these numbers a few years ago and I said: 'Look, I think if we make it limited edition and do something special with it, it will do well enough that we can justify it from a financial perspective.' But I'm not going to sit here and say it's gonna sell 5,000 copies. It's not going to do what a Hammer boxset will do. It's not going to do what a *Hellraiser* boxset will do.

But if we don't do it, it's going to get to the point where no one's going to release these films properly and they're only going to exist as really old, poor DVDs. This was the moment to pay a bit of money to do them properly, to get some great extras. And the reaction's been fantastic.

### When you lavish care and attention on a set like that, you're going to attract consumers who might not have otherwise paid attention...

I think so. If you look at the labels that are doing well and are still around, and new labels that have appeared, there is something that unites all of them and that is the quality of the releases. You can't just bang these titles out, whether it's the most niche thing in the world or the most commercial thing in the world. It might be a new 2K master or 4K master, but you can't just slap it on a disc and say 'There you go...' and charge people £15 for it. They'll just say, 'You're charging me £15 for this, but Arrow are charging me £15 for a disc with two hours' worth of extras, a booklet and it's a really nice-looking release, and they've gone back to the original negative.'

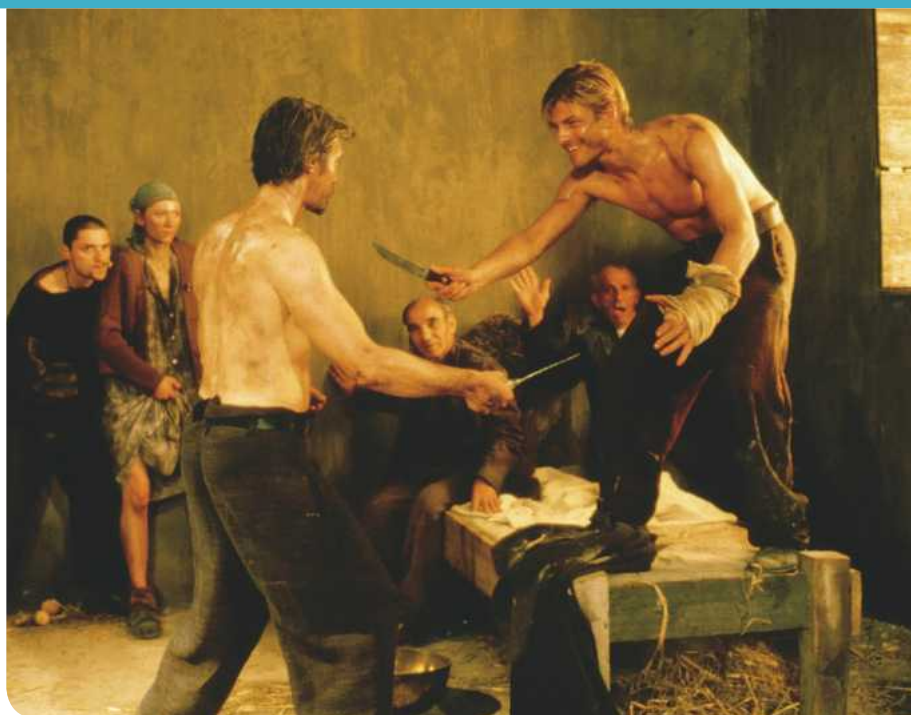
With the Jarman set, if we'd done a DVD-only release, with only the extras from the old discs and nothing else, and a booklet, not a book, then the people who have been waiting for these films to be treated with the respect they deserve would have thought we'd dropped the ball. So we only did it on Blu-ray – I just don't think the audience for the set are DVD people. These are people upgrading to a Blu-ray. They want these films and, like you said, if you do it right you're gonna attract people who might have looked at some of the old ones and gone, 'These are really tired now. They don't look good.'

The audience for our stuff, that's cult TV, that's British, world cinema – whatever it seems to be, they're definitely skewed towards Blu-ray.

I don't really understand anything just coming out on DVD. I think the way that Powerhouse has decided to ditch DVD and go Blu-ray-only is interesting...

### Do dual-format releases still fulfil a purpose at the BFI then?

I see the argument for doing Blu-ray-only, focusing on those who want to either upgrade their DVD or



Above: Sean Bean shows off his knife skills in *Caravaggio*, one of the titles in the BFI's recent *Jarman... boxset*

people who never bought it because they grew up in the Blu-ray era. For a lot of those people, the DVD in a dual-format release is just a coaster.

But there's still a market for it with certain titles, particularly if they haven't actually had a DVD release before. With Jarman, for example, if three out of the five films had never had a DVD release in the UK, I would have been tempted to do a more basic packaged version for that format just to make them available. Or maybe just standalone DVDs of those titles. I don't want to give people lots of different options, I think people can get a bit confused and a bit exasperated by all the different versions, all the different releases.

Nobody aside from Disney gets away with it quite to the level that they do. Nine releases of everything. And they've always been able to do it. It confuses me. I don't even know what version everything's got: a Light Side slipcase, a Dark Side slipcase, a 4K, a 3D, a standalone, a Steelbook...

Studios are slightly exempt from the rules that everyone else plays by, but I think keeping it relatively simple is actually better. I've spoken to retailers who have become exasperated by the amount of versions, because people come in to ask for something and you have to say: 'What version do you want? Do you want the 3D, do you want the Steelbook, do you want the Steelbook 3D, do you want the 4K, do you want a DVD, do you want the dual-format?'

When you start putting certain extras on certain releases in certain territories, that's really going too far. People got very aggravated with *Star Trek Into Darkness* when Paramount did these different territory versions and retailer exclusives, all with different extras. Did they really want people to buy all the different versions just to get all of the extras?

### Are studios becoming more approachable when it comes to acquisitions?

Some are. I think everyone knows the major untapped resource is Warner Bros. People would

love to mine that catalogue. It's one of the strongest and biggest catalogues in the world and also has a lot of British films from the 1970s and '80s.

We've done a couple of titles, most notably *The Devils*, which was an incredible film to be able to release. Despite our release not being completely uncut and only being able to do it on DVD and not Blu-ray, it was still an amazing title to get. Maybe one day the elusive uncut version will have its day on Blu-ray...

It's a shame when you look at what the other studios are doing. Many (including Warners) are doing a lot of transfer work, creating very good 2K and 4K masters. If you look at what Powerhouse is doing – getting really good 2K and 4K masters from (predominately) Sony – most of them don't require further technical work. It's doing great extras, but isn't having to spend crazy amounts of money doing work on the masters. And now those films are seeing the light of day whereas before, the only way to see them was on a low-quality DVD.

### How beneficial is it having restoration people in-house?

It's very good. It's interesting, we've just released *They Came to a City*, which is one of the forgotten Ealing films. We did a lot of it in-house. We did a 2K scan of that film at the BFI National Archive, from the best surviving element. We did all the grading in-house as well. And then R3Store Studios did some work on it.

So there were a lot of people involved, but it saved a lot of money – compared to doing it externally it was thousands of pounds less. And that's when it becomes worth doing. You want the films in the best possible shape, but you've got to be realistic.

### How highly does the BFI value the booklets that accompany Blu-rays?

It's an interesting evolution from titles 10, 12 years ago that didn't even have booklets, or maybe had a four-page insert with one essay. Now you're looking at doing 32-page, 40-page booklets, so we really have got to a different place. But I think they are important, particularly on certain films that require a lot of context. When you do Derek Jarman you're doing a bespoke boxset; you do an 80-page book with it. Those films need context: how they were made, when they were made, why they were made... how the hell did they come about? The whole history, the whole evolution of him as a filmmaker, you can't sum that up in 28 pages really.

### What are the pros and cons of acquiring pre-existing material to use as bonus features as opposed to generating brand-new content?

Obviously we can include a lot of archive material that we own the rights to, and if we can do it internally it's a negligible amount of money.

There's a lot of stuff that we own the rights to, things like the Central Office of Information (COI) catalogue, British Transport Films, the Mitchell & Kenyon collection, and a lot of those things do make nice extras, such as the COI films on *When the Wind Blows*, for example.



The BFI packed its *When the Wind Blows* Blu-ray with extras from its National Archive

## BFI Flipside

Remembering forgotten British cinema...



Now up to more than 30 releases, the BFI's Flipside imprint is devoted to 'reclaiming a space' for forgotten British films – mostly titles that have never had a home media outing at all.

Recent releases include '70s biker horror *Psychomania*, the Cliff Richard musical satire *Expresso Bongo* (1959, pictured), and the 48-minute thriller *The Orchard End Murder*, which supported 1981's *Dead and Buried* as a cinematic double-bill.

'You can't pretend that these films weren't made in this country,' says Stoddart. 'You can't pretend that this actually didn't happen. *The Orchard End Murder* may well be salacious and a bit grubby, but it's a well-made film.'

'It was digitised as part of the Unlocking Film Heritage programme, so it was selected to be scanned using public money. And my feeling was that if we've decided to do that, it's part of our responsibility, to a degree, to publish that film. Make it available to the public. Let's give it a release.'

There's a responsibility the BFI has to publish work that's held in its National Archive. And BFI Player has been fantastic for that, because it's a great way of publishing a lot of material through the Unlocking Film Heritage programme and all the stuff that got digitised for that.

So we have all these things that have been digitised, but we just can't release DVDs and DVDs of them, because they won't sell enough and it's a huge amount of work.

They're great as extras on releases, and a lot are on BFI Player, often for free. We have a responsibility – this material shouldn't be locked away where no one can see it.

### I presume you have a good handle on the schedule for 2019. Are you planning for 2020 yet?

Not as far as that. There are often ideas about what's going to be happening in-venue [at BFI Southbank] quite far in advance – and I'm all up for knowing what those things are going to be in advance, so I can think about, okay, so if we're going to do a celebration of black British cinema or something, let's start thinking about what we can do with that.

When you're talking about things that might be big archive projects, a film that might be restored, my first question is do we have the rights to do a home entertainment release. I'm up for films being restored, obviously, but I'd like us to have the rights to release it, rather than we restore it, then deliver it to someone else and they release it. I'd much rather it stayed within the BFI's own output.

Woodfall-related, we're looking at potentially a follow-up collection. I didn't want to call this Volume One, because you're committing to doing Volume Two, and we haven't actually licensed the titles.

We're in conversation with Woodfall, which is in turn in conversation with, well, predominantly MGM. So I'm thinking about that and if we could do, in 2019, a legacy release really. I don't think you can go wrong with the films; they're fantastic.

*Red White and Zero*, which you might notice is not in the collection, we actually have the licence for, so we are going to do it later this year. And we felt that, while it is a Woodfall film, it's not like anything else



in the collection. It's portmanteau. You've got the involvement of Zero Mostel, who had nothing to do with Woodfall specifically, and director Peter Brook, who also wasn't a regular collaborator.

I don't think this really sits in the boxset quite as well as the other content, and Woodfall was happy to see it get a separate release. If you plonk it in that boxset it does stand out as being not quite... it doesn't quite fit.

### Are your release dates set in stone?

It's difficult. I think we're always up against it. I loathe moving release dates, from a fan point of view and from a retailer point of view.

I remember a few years ago we had a lot of things moved back. *Wages of Fear* went back extensively. That was mainly to do with the licensor doing a 2K master and then announcing that it was going to do a 4K restoration from the original nitrate. If it was a choice between doing a new 4K restoration that also ended up being a longer cut, I thought it was worth the wait. And I know the delays annoyed people.

I think we're in a very unique moment right now in the industry, where it's more imperative than it's ever been to do definitive releases. Because just how many more license periods are there? If you license a film for five years, for seven years, if you're licensing that now, then what's the industry going to look like in the future? Is somebody going to want to license it for another seven years or even another five years? Are they really going to do another release better than what's already available? Yes, possibly – if we're talking about doing 4K on certain films – but for most of what we do that's not really relevant.

### I'm presume you're keeping an eye on the 4K Blu-ray market?

You've got to keep an eye on it. I think there are only really a couple of titles in our catalogue that it applies to, but you've got to keep an eye on how it's doing generally. On what other indie labels are doing.

We've had a couple of people approach us about titles where they've got a brand-new 4K master and they want to know if we're interested in doing a 4K release, but a couple of the films they asked about, I was like, 'That would be financial suicide.' In a way I'd be kind of interested, but only purely as a film fan. It's an interesting idea, but it would be a bad business decision.

### CultFilms has crowdfunded its upcoming 4K Blu-ray release of *Suspiria*...

I think the BFI are somewhat restricted in regards to that, as a registered charity. You're already spending public money.

We did look at it before, on a couple of things that we knew, if we did them, would be very expensive to do. Particularly getting new scores commissioned for silent films; things like that are very expensive. We've done that on marque releases like *Napoleon*, *Shiraz: A Romance of India* and *The Epic of Everest*.

One thing we can look at more, potentially, is cost-sharing deals with other labels for other

territories. We have done that before. *Psychomania*, which we did here and Arrow did in the US. *Symptoms*, which Mondo did in the US.

We're going to be releasing Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* on Blu-ray, which will be a new 4K restoration. Our technical team are reviewing the materials and have already had some scans done on what we hold. Arrow are doing it in the US so we're cost-sharing with them, so we can do a new restoration and we can both save money on it. It is set for release in October both here and in America.

### Are there any particular dream projects that you'd like to work on?

For me, the one that stands out is Elem Klimov's *Come and See*. It's one of the most astounding films ever. The sound design; the look of it. It's like nothing you've ever seen. The two-disc DVD was good, but technology has moved on.

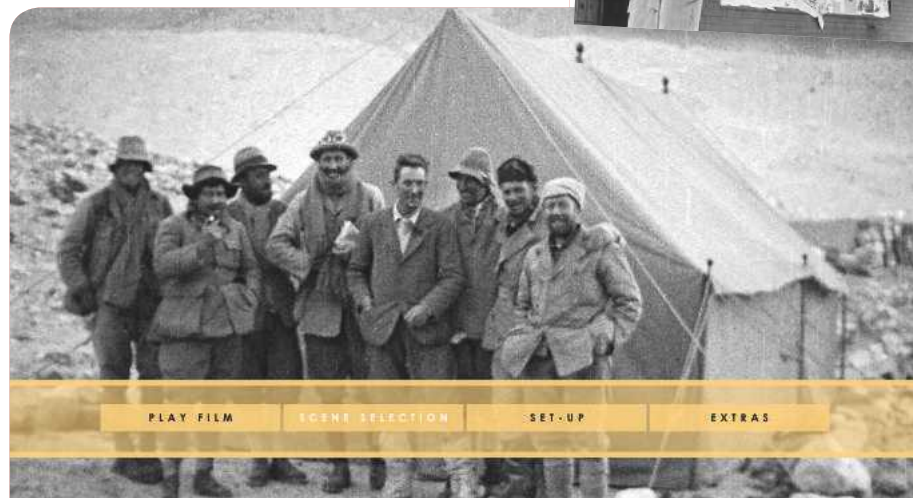
I have enquired about it before. But as with a lot of Russian films, there are rights issues around it. I wouldn't be surprised if Criterion do a UK release of it – and I've gotta say, I'd be delighted if they did, because they would do it superbly well. There are some great Russian films that have never seen the light of day here. I know [Andre] Tarkovsky's finally had his moment with proper releases, but there's a lot of great Russian cinema, and I'd like to do more of it – they've got some amazing science-fiction, and some very good war films.

### Lastly, how do you see the UK home entertainment landscape panning out?

It is shrinking. Nobody can deny that. There are labels who are faring better than others. And if you look at those that are doing well, there's a consistency to what they're doing. They're doing deep-catalogue and they're doing it to a very high standard. So I think, yes, it's shrinking, but we're in a strong position, as a lot of these other [independent] labels are.

We're all trying to do the definitive editions of the things we're releasing. And I mean worldwide definitive editions, really. Us doing *When the Wind Blows*. Arrow doing *The Thing*... It's all about upping the ante and doing it to the best possible standard ■

Woodfall Films portmanteau flick *Red White and Zero* (below) is lined up for a 2018 BD release; the BFI commissioned a new score for silent mountaineering doc *The Epic of Everest* (bottom)



# The 4K high life







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Check out a luxury theatre where 11-channel  
 3D audio and 4K HDR projection are  
 married to smart design

**THIS HIGH-SPEC HOME** theatre from custom install specialist Cyberhomes is somewhat unusual as the orientation of seating and screen doesn't follow the typical 'longest dimension' rule. Instead, the owners were keen to pivot the layout through 90 degrees, to place the room's twin doors either side of the eventual PJ screen for pleasing aesthetic symmetry. Cyberhomes' challenge was therefore to accommodate a 4K-projection, Dolby Atmos system within this configuration, while still maintaining the expected premium performance.

Behind the Screen Research screen, which fits snugly between the room's two doors, sit Triad InWall Gold/6 Monitor speakers, the US company's range-topping option, plus two in-wall subs. Bipole in-wall models, again from Triad, are adopted for the rear and surround channels; their extra dispersion deemed necessary due to the close proximity of the seating row. Traditional in-ceiling speakers (rear Atmos), 45-degree angled in-ceiling speakers (front Atmos), and two further subwoofers at the back of the room complete the system. Processing is from AudioControl's Maestro M9, with power delivered by a 12-channel amplifier from BGW. A full acoustic treatment (diffusion, absorption and bass management panels), plus Dirac calibration, was conducted.

For its bigscreen images, the cinema features a Sony VPL-VW550ES 4K HDR projector. Sources are Sky Q, Apple TV and a Kaleidescape UHD player/server combi. Again, full calibration was performed.

Lutron smart lighting, Control4-powered system operation and luxury Fortress seating finish off a cinema room we'd love to kick back in... ■

#### A. On reflection

This coffered ceiling incorporates a starfield light effect for that extra slice of wow-factor, but also functions to reduce sonic reflections from the system's LCR soundstage

#### B. Behind the mask

Motorised masking of the Screen Research screen enables it to switch automatically between 16:9 and 2.35:1 aspect ratio presentation ➤

#### KIT CHECKLIST

**AUDIOCONTROL:** Maestro M9 surround processor

**BGW:** VXi 8.4 power amplifier (12 x 200W)

**SCREEN RESEARCH:** X4R projection screen with motorised top/bottom masking

**SONY:** VPL-VW550ES 4K HDR projector

**TRIAD:** 3 x InWall Gold/6 Monitor speakers; 4 x InWall Silver/4 Surround speakers; 2 x InWall Silver/4 MiniMonitor speakers (in-ceiling); 2 x InCeiling Silver/6 speakers (in-ceiling); 2 x InRoom Gold Sub subwoofers; 2 x InWall Bronze/4 SlimSub subwoofers; 3 x RackAmp 700 DSP amplifiers

**FORTRESS SEATING:** 7 x Kensington leather cinema chairs with electric incline

**CONTROL4:** C4-EA3 processor; C4-SR260RSK remote control

**APPLE:** Apple TV

**KALEIDESCAPE:** Strato 4K Ultra HD movie player; 24TB Terra movie server

**SKY:** Sky Q Silver PVR



### **C. Sitting pretty**

For seating, Cyberhomes installed seven Fortress Kensington electric recliners. The gorgeous two-tone colour scheme matches the rest of the room

### **D. Come on down**

A Future Automation motorised lift brings the Sony VPL-VW550 projector down when it's movie time

### **E. Power pusher**

From US brand BGW comes the VXi 8.4, a heavyweight 12-channel power amplifier boasting a fully-balanced design. The company also makes a 16-channel model if you fancy one

### **F. What to watch?**

In addition to Apple and Sky sources, the owners can view 4K HDR movies through the cinema's Kaleidescape system, browsing onscreen via the artwork-rich GUI





# CITY HOME CINEMAS

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Lumagen RadiancePro UltraHD Video Processor



Wisdom L2 Cinema surround speakers



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# Stand and deliver



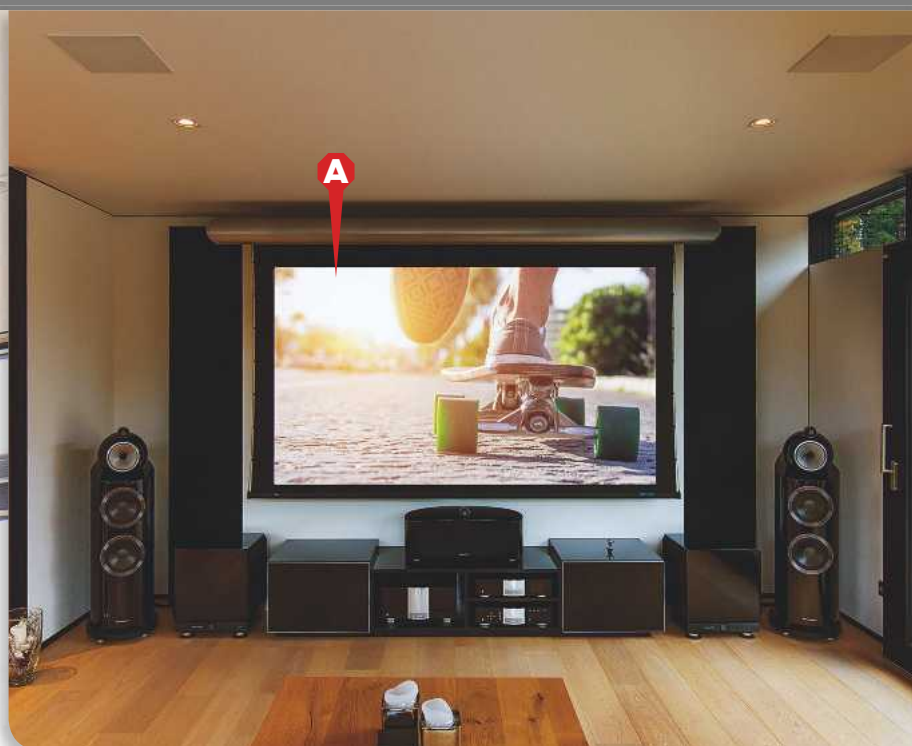
Here's a movie room that doesn't try to hide its premium audio system, and still rocks a Pioneer Kuro plasma

## KIT CHECKLIST

**JVC:** DLA-X500 projector  
**STEWART FILMSCREEN:** Motorised Cabaret  
 ElectriScreen projector screen  
**PIONEER:** 50in Kuro plasma  
**BOWERS & WILKINS:** 2 x 802 D3 (left/right); 2 x CWM  
 7.3 (surround); 2 x CCM 682 (in-ceiling); HTMI D3  
 (centre); 2 x DB1 subwoofers  
**ROTEL:** RB-1572 power amp  
**KRELL:** Foundation 4K UHD processor; Connect  
 network streaming amp; Chorus 5200 power amp  
**CAMBRIDGE AUDIO:** Azur Blu-ray player  
**AMAZON:** Fire TV  
**T-HOME:** Media receiver  
**RTI:** T2x remote control; XP-6 control processor







**NOT ALL PROFESSIONAL** cinema rooms are based around a discrete install where hiding kit is of paramount concern. The owner of this system, put together by German outfit Hi-Fi Forum, doesn't mind having its potent hardware fully on show.

The room's front wall is dominated by a pair of B&W 800 Series Diamond speakers, which handle L/R duties in a 7.2 system powered and processed by premium Krell electronics. The twin subwoofers and centre speaker also make their presence felt, below a wall-mounted Pioneer Kuro plasma that's still going strong. For largescale entertainment, a motorised projector screen drops into view, providing a canvas for the room's JVC DLA-X500 projector. Sources include an Amazon Fire TV streamer and Cambridge Audio Blu-ray player.

An RTI processor – and custom-designed user interface – gives the owner full control over the system from a single remote, which was one of the owner's key demands. Pre-programmed macros enable one-button activities that see lighting, blinds, projector screen and AV gear work together in unison ■

### A. Press to play

This motorised Stewart Filmscreen projector screen, integrated into the room's RTI system control, offers an alternative to the owner's Kuro plasma. It's partnered with a ceiling-mounted JVC projector that delivers pixel-shifted 4K images and 3D playback

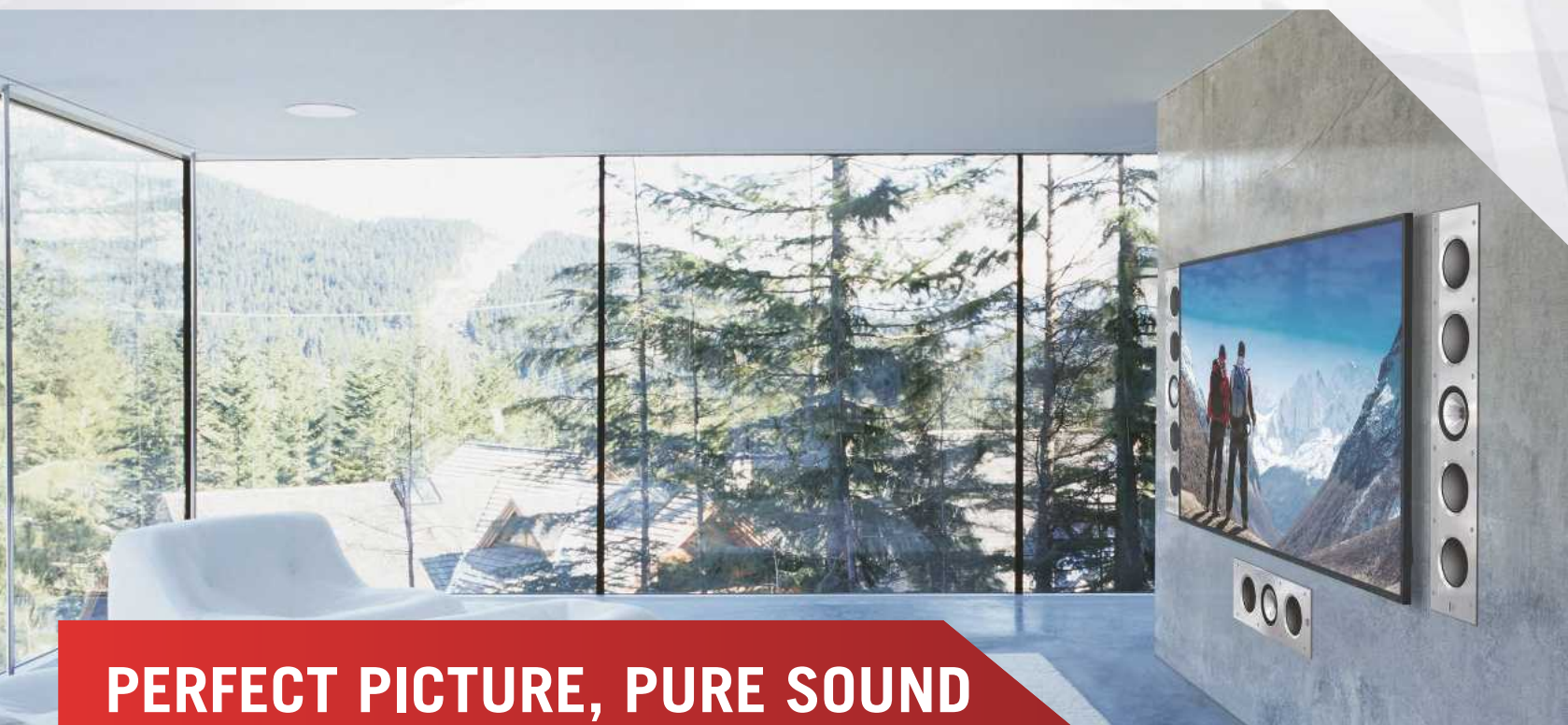
### B. Towers of power

Near the very top of Bowers and Wilkins' speaker range (only outgunned by its Nautilus flagship) sits its 800 Diamond Series. This system uses 802 D3 floorstanders and a pair of DB1 subwoofers.

### C. Highway to Krell

For main amplification and processing, the installer opted for separates from high-end US corp Krell. Power is rated at 200W per channel, with the Foundation 4K UHD processor offering no fewer than 10 HDMI inputs





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# REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE** REL Entry-level 10in subwoofer **SAMSUNG** 55in 4K HDR QLED TV  
**ACOUSTIC ENERGY** Floorstanding 5.1 system **YAMAHA** Nine-channel Dolby Atmos/DTS:X  
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## Dancing on the ceiling

Focal's 300 ICW 8 install speakers aim to take your Atmos system to new heights. We put them to the test on p52



### HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed



These stylish speakers from Acoustic Energy are a chip off the old block, says **Ed Selley**





# Back to the future

There is the faintest whiff of nostalgia about Acoustic Energy's 100 Series. This range is all-new but the brand has indulged itself by reusing a name (AE109) that first appeared over twenty years ago. The original speaker was sufficiently successful that I can forgive Acoustic Energy for wanting to hark back to it...

This system, priced at around £1,300, is full-size (but not gigantic – more on that later) yet still eminently affordable, and will catch the eye of those looking to 'step up' from a sub/sat package. The 100 Series is entry-level for Acoustic Energy, and runs to only four models, which makes a change from speaker lines that aim to cover numerous options through myriad sizes. All four models are featured in this 5.1 system.

## Four's company

The oily bits of the 100 Series are conventional enough. Each of the passive speakers use a 4in paper cone driver for their midbass work. Acoustic Energy has almost completely abandoned the use of the metal drivers that once defined its speakers, but has retained a nod to those times with the continued use of a conical dust cap.

Four inches isn't terribly large as drivers go, so the company has implemented a comparatively long-throw, backed up by a hefty motor system, to give them the required low-end urge.

Partnering this driver is a 1in soft dome tweeter, recessed slightly into a 'WDT' waveguide. This, explains Acoustic Energy, is evolved from the 'DXT lens' introduced on its Reference Series. The waveguide aims to improve the high-frequency dispersion from the dome, and allow for better integration with the midbass unit.

In the great scheme of things, a combination of paper midbass and fabric tweeter isn't going to have NASA beating a path to Acoustic Energy's headquarters in Cirencester, but the partnership is still capable of giving great results. It also offers the possibility of a more forgiving tone than metal drivers can exhibit when partnered with brighter amplification.

The main speaker in the pack is the aforementioned AE109. This floorstanding 2.5-way design (£500 per pair) is only partly an evocation of the original AE109 that was a landmark product for the company, as it shares little beyond the name and the basic layout – Acoustic Energy says its cabinet takes its 'styling cues' from its premium Reference series.

A floorstander it may be, but it also makes for a usefully compact speaker at just 80cm tall, shorter than most ➤

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
Floorstanding 5.1 speaker package

**POSITION:**  
Acoustic Energy's entry-level line, below 300 Series and Reference

**PEERS:**  
Q Acoustics 3000i; Mission LX

**1. Identical drivers are used across the range**



rivals. It isn't particularly wide either (16cm), and measures 24cm deep. Despite these compact dimensions, thanks to the use of a slot port, Acoustic Energy claims an impressive low-frequency response of 40Hz.

The speaker is extremely solid. Surprisingly so, in fact. Its 18mm-thick cabinet is mass-loaded and the whole speaker weighs in at no less than 17.5kg. This mass allows Acoustic Energy to do without a wide 'foot' for the AE109 (it does come with spikes, but these weren't photographed) as it's already very stable.

## 'Clean, modern and elegant – Acoustic Energy has done a cracking aesthetic job with its new 100 Series'

The AE100 standmount speaker (£200 per pair) is used here for surround channels. This is considerably less weighty and solid-feeling, but is again compact and leverages its own slot port to boast a claimed low-end extension of 45Hz. Acoustic Energy's AE107 centre speaker (£200) effectively mimics the driver complement of the AE109 and has an identical claimed low-end reach.

With the same 4in midbass and 1in tweeters across all the speakers, the handover between them should be seamless.

### LFE control

The AE108 subwoofer continues the compact theme. A down-firing 8in paper cone driver design (with 150W onboard amplifier), it is no less well-built than the passive models and sports some hefty spiked feet to raise it off the floor and let the woofer breathe. The back panel is uncluttered, but an LFE input, phase, volume and crossover controls are all its users are likely to want.

A fairly unusual feature at the £400 price point is the inclusion of a remote control. This augments rather



than replaces the standard on/off sensor on the phono input, and allows you to trim the performance for late-night listening, Jerry Bruckheimer blockbusters or other aberrant events.

Cosmetically, Acoustic Energy has done a cracking job with the 100 Series. In the black finish of our sample, the effect is clean, modern and very elegant, but still very clearly from the Acoustic Energy design stable. Chrome trim rings around the drivers ensure that the overall appearance is not depressingly black, and curved cabinet edges ooze class. For those of a more traditional disposition, a Walnut finish is also available. You can drape the speakers with supplied full-length magnetic grilles if you want.

### Energy by name...

The quoted impedance and sensitivity measurements (the latter being 89dB for the AE109) suggest these won't be a difficult load for the current crop of affordable AV receivers, and this 100 Series array quickly demonstrates that it does indeed seem to be easy to drive, needing a noticeably lower volume setting on my AVR (I used NAD's T 777 V3) to hit the same levels as my usual Elipson satellites.

The company clearly hasn't abandoned the 'Energy' part of its name either. The way this system handles the gunshot



attack on the Stark house in *Iron Man 3* (Blu-ray – I was hurriedly trying to make sure I was as prepped as I could be for *Avengers: Infinity War...*) is brilliantly boisterous. Missiles rip their way through concrete with a potent level of impact to the blasts. Obviously a lot of this comes from the punchy subwoofer, but it helps that the level of bass extension that the front speakers in particular are capable of generating is tangible. This spreading of low-end energy across the front soundstage makes for a more immersive presentation than you'll typically enjoy from a smaller-scale setup.

Alongside this natural-sounding bass weight, the system proves convincing and consistent at extracting soundtrack details, and peeling away layers. The urgent dialogue between Tony Stark and Pepper Potts isn't lost in the mass of noise and effects.

The tonal realism on offer here is also good. The frenetic sound of explosions isn't perhaps the best example of this, but the watery noises once Stark's suit is submerged are extremely believable. There is the impression that there could be a little more sparkle to the treble delivery from those 1in soft dome tweeters, but I'm not expecting miracles at this price and the overall sound is unfatiguing.

## 'Alongside natural-sounding bass, this system proves convincing at extracting soundtrack details'

Next off the Blu-ray pile was Pixar's *Cars 3*. The Thunder Hollow demolition derby sequence showcased the system's abundant energy, with light-footed and effective movement of Foley effects from speaker to speaker.

And it never sounds strained or overblown. The various different engine noises of the challenging cars are all faithfully replicated and there is enough separation of soundtrack details to lift dialogue from the rest.

This sequence's pyrotechnic effects would have more impact from a deeper bass delivery, but again the spread and integration of low-frequencies between the cabinets and AE108 woofer at least means you never feel that sound is being beamed at you. In a larger room, cinephiles with a bass fetish will look towards a bigger system, but in my typical-sized space this lack of outright slam is a payoff that can be lived with.

### Higher or lower

Push the volume high and the mid and treble delivery of this Acoustic Energy system does begin to harden up a little – but you do have to be very heavy-handed for that to happen. At the same time, you don't have to ramp up the level to enjoy these speakers; they retain their dynamism and abundant drive even at lower volumes, unlike a number of packages I've auditioned in recent years where there is a significant tail off in performance. Being able to tweak the subwoofer level from the remote is handy here, as it keeps the sense of heft needed to stop material becoming thin.

Streamed two-channel music, with the brilliant BluOS interface of the NAD T 777 V3 receiver doing the honours, finds the AE109s in good fettle. The speakers get stuck into the impossibly good *Caer* by Twin Shadow (Tidal Master) with the same eager yet controlled approach they show with film soundtracks. Acoustic Energy's quoted 40Hz

## SPECIFICATIONS

### AE109

**DRIVE UNITS:** 2 x 4in paper cone midbass drivers; 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter  
**ENCLOSURE:** Rear slot-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 40Hz-35kHz  
**SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 89dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 150W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 160(w) x 800(h) x 240(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 17.5kg

### AE100

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 4in paper cone midbass driver; 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter  
**ENCLOSURE:** Rear slot-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 45Hz-35kHz  
**SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 75W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 160(w) x 270(h) x 240(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4kg

### AE107

**DRIVE UNITS:** 2 x 4in paper cone midbass drivers; 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter  
**ENCLOSURE:** Rear slot-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 40Hz-35kHz  
**SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 90dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 150W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 420(w) x 160(h) x 240(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 6kg

### AE108 (subwoofer)

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 8in downward-firing paper woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed  
**FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 30Hz-110Hz **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 150W  
**REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 280(w) x 280(h) x 280(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 12kg **FEATURES:** LFE input; stereo phono input; phase switch; variable crossover; spiked feet

## PARTNER WITH



**YAMAHA RX-V685:** The high sensitivity but low price of the 100 Series makes it well-suited to mid-tier AVRs. Yamaha's incoming RX-V685 (7.2-channel, £650) claims 90W per channel, and you could run MusicCast speakers as wireless rears for 7.1.

low-frequency response probably involves a level of roll-off or room reinforcement, but there's always enough bass energy to give music full-range appeal. It's a punchy and entertaining listen.

Broadcast TV, meanwhile, gives the AE107 centre speaker a chance to shine. It projects dialogue out into the room well, and keeps the periodically muffled mutterings that can bedevil modern programming as clear and easy to follow as possible. As a whole, this system, with its accommodating footprint, is well-suited to use on a day-in, day-out basis.

## Drive and excitement

The 100 Series is like a rather successful Greatest Hits album. There's plenty of classic Acoustic Energy here in terms of the drive and excitement they can muster, and there are enough little styling touches to please long-term fans of the brand. The clean and thoroughly modern appearance is a plus point, even more so the size and reassuring heft of the cabinets. There might be some nostalgia in the naming but there's nothing old-fashioned about this well-priced array ■

**2. Rear bass ports are slot-shaped to reduce the chance of audible airflow**

**3. The remote-driven AE108 subwoofer features simple connectivity**

## HCC VERDICT



### Acoustic Energy 100 Series 5.1

→ £1,300 → [www.acoustic-energy.co.uk](http://www.acoustic-energy.co.uk)

**WE SAY:** Acoustic Energy's latest addition scores well on style, ease of install and price, and puts in a consistently entertaining multichannel performance.

**Richard Stevenson** finds out if Yamaha's top-flight AVR is ready to fend off the 11-channel competition

# Bursting with AV energy

Yamaha's Aventure RX-A3070 AV receiver has recently been reduced to a very appealing £1,600, almost two-thirds the price of its RX-A3060 forebear – and less than half the price of Denon's flagship AVC-X8500H [see HCC #285]. It ticks plenty of the must-have feature boxes, including multiroom, is compatible with the expected audio and video formats, and appears to be exceptional value.

However, I must have auditioned too many 11-channel models recently as even before I opened the box there was a momentary sigh. The cardboard carton proudly boasts the AVR supports next-gen object-based audio formats, yet also reveals it to be a 9.2-channel design.

So, if you want to run a 7.2.4 system (which the RX-A3070 can process) you will need an additional external power amplifier. They are not cheap, add to the box and cabling count, and are unlikely to have the same sonic signature as the onboard amps.

I had the same 'issue' with the RX-A3060. An 11-channel setup is by no means a necessity (and Yamaha's solution on the RX-A3070 is to include Virtual Presence Speakers so you can at least enjoy 'faux' 7.2.4 entertainment), but it would be preferable if Yamaha added two extra power amps on its next flagship AVR, if only to keep up with its competitors and cater to (nearly) all end users.

Still, if you are happy with nine channels of grunt, there is a lot to salute here. The power claim is a healthy 150W per channel into 8 ohms (20Hz–20kHz); there is decoding for Dolby Atmos and DTS:X (if not Auro-3D); and Yamaha's DSP modes are among the best in the business. It's fully networked, and offers a class leading four-zone multiroom setup.

## The A.R.T. of design

Build quality is stellar, too, with an attractive aluminium fascia and a chunky drop-down flap that feel likely to resist all but the most serious of AVR abuse. Underneath is a fifth foot to support the weighty chassis; this, in a maelstrom of marketing, Yamaha refers to as an Anti Resonance Technology (A.R.T.) Wedge. It is said to improve sound by

dampening vibrations from the transformer, transistors and heat sinks, as well as suppressing airborne vibrations, such as potent LFE explosions.

The remote control feels rather feeble and plasticky, however. It's very lightweight and the legends are so microscopically small even those with decent eyesight will be searching for reading glasses. Yamaha's AV Controller app is a whole lot prettier, especially the DSP mode page with its full-colour pictorial icons. Who would have thought the 'Church in Freiburg' has blue stained-glass windows?

## Aventure advantage

As an Aventure series product, the RX-A3070's hi-fi audio credentials are top-notch. There are ESS's well-regarded audiophile Sabre Pro DACs for the main seven channels, an H-shape cross-member design in the chassis to reduce vibration, and balanced XLR stereo inputs for your key two-channel source.

On the digital audio side, the receiver will decode high-resolution formats up to DSD 5.6MHz and the feature set includes Yamaha's slightly misnamed High Resolution Music Enhancer. This actually upconverts lossless CD-quality material, such as FLAC files, to double their sampling frequency to, says Yamaha, 'further heighten the musicality of the original content.' Several audiophile stereo DACs do the same thing, so there might just be something in it.

At the other end of the audio resolution spectrum is Yamaha's Compressed Music Restorer. This works well to put a bit of sparkle back into lo-fi MP3 material.

There is one feature the RX-A3070 can boast that even the mighty Denon AVC-X8500H

1. The RX-A3070 is also available in silver

2. A refresh of Yamaha's handset would be welcome



## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
9.2-channel  
networked AVR

**POSITION:**  
Top of Yamaha's  
receiver range

**PEERS:**  
Arcam FMJ AVR390;  
Denon AVR-  
X6400H





2



cannot; a proper terrestrial radio. Not only do you get a real FM tuner, you get DAB and DAB+ too. If networked radio and streaming is more your thing, Yamaha has those bases covered with a suite that includes Spotify, Napster, Tidal, Deezer, Quobuz and AirPlay.

As for video, the RX-A3070 is no less impressive given its relatively affordable price tag. There is 4K/60p and BT.2020 passthrough for your premium video sources (with compatibility for Dolby Vision, HDR10 and HLG formats) and 4K upscaling for anything else. All eight of its HDMI inputs – one found behind the receiver's front flap, where's there's also a handy USB port – are HDCP 2.2-compliant. Which is just as it should be.

### Measure for measure

Naturally, the RX-A3070 comes with automated EQ and setup. Yamaha's YPAO system here is the full 64-bit version using multi-point and multi-angle measurement

**'When the going gets tough, the Yamaha's audio is big and boisterous with the fun factor turned up to 11'**

to EQ the sound on a three-dimensional basis. The measurement system itself is a good notch above anything Audyssey has in the domestic AV space at present – yet actually configuring and using the RX-A3070 feels somewhat behind the curve.

Yamaha's GUI has not changed for quite some time and feels disappointingly dated. It's not overly pretty and lacks the little explanatory sentences you get on more cutting-edge GUIs. As such, when asked if you would like to switch bafflingly bespoke features on or off, you must refer to the manual (on the supplied CD) to find out what they do. Many users confronted with 'Adaptive DSP Control' will feel the need to resort to a rummage through the digital paperwork.

The good news is that the RX-A3070 is supplied with a 3D microphone stand to help measure speaker heights and angles. If your AVR can measure where your speakers are, theoretically you don't need to start setup proceedings by telling it what speaker configuration you are using.

Out of the box, this receiver defaulted to a basic single-zone setup and the auto-configuration system sent test tones and measured a 7.2.4 system, because that is what I had wired into the speaker terminals. That resulted in a room map of where my 7.2.4 speakers were; their heights, angles, sizes and levels.

The thing is, the RX-A3070 still only has nine channels of power to play with; I could hear relays switching the power amps to different speaker outputs to measure the connected 7.2.4 array. This full-system measuring is useful for when you want to switch between different layouts, though, as the Yamaha will have already done its EQ groundwork.

There were some anomalies in the measurements themselves. The YPAO system ignored my LFE channels and fell over when I deliberately reversed front and rear height speakers and swapped around left





and right on one of those speaker sets too. The RX-A3070 glossed over those errors completely, showing a set of results that said all was fine and dandy. That didn't give me a lot of faith in its erudite room-tuning abilities, although the sonic results were difficult to dislike.

## It's hammer time

This receiver powers out movies with a gutsy balance and energy that reminds me of the sound of Denon's older AVRs before it started to aim for a little more refinement. Bass effects are tight, taut and slam hard. Action movies are delivered with blistering pace and the sound is upscale even in a vanilla 7.1 'straight' setup. The opening sequence to *Thor: Ragnarok* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) works well, Chris Hemsworth's distinct timbre neatly executed through the stark, comedy dialogue.

The RX-A3070 really comes alive as the battle ensues and Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song* is pulled to the fore of the sonic action. Worthy of its top-of-the-range status, this is a large sound with plenty of power – and with it oodles of sheer entertainment value. Each impact of Thor's mighty hammer becomes an epic cinematic moment via my dual subwoofer system as Robert Plant wails away in the background.

Yet there is not the sheer space in the soundstage or the crystal-clear effects that other AVRs can muster. When the going gets tough, with a dragon chasing Thor through the flaming sky, the audio is big and boisterous with the fun factor turned up to 11. But the Yamaha creates more of a 'wall of sound', rather than a three-dimensional vista with distinct effects in every object-based audio corner of the room. It was the same with the Dolby Atmos mix on Luc Besson's *Lucy* (Blu-ray). It was good, but the sound never really exceeded the sum of its nine-channel parts.

Testing the RX-A3070 with a raft of material from Atmos 4K discs to broadcast terrestrial TV, it remains a very impressive beast for the money. What it lacks in pure resolution, it makes up for in energy.

With simpler material it excels, crafting an engaging soundmix with sit-coms and intense dramas alike. Dialogue handling is particularly impressive; it's rich and accurate, with famous names rendered immediately obvious by the

## SPECIFICATIONS

**DOLBY ATMOS:** Yes **DTS:X:** Yes **THX:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** No **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** Yes, 11.2-channel **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 9 x 150W (into 8 ohms) **MULTIROOM:** Yes, Zone 2, 3, 4 **AV INPUTS:** 4 x composite; 6 x digital audio (3 x optical and 3 x coaxial) **HDMI:** Yes, 8 x inputs; 2 x outputs **COMPONENT VIDEO:** Yes, 2 x inputs **VIDEO UPSCALING:** Yes, To 4K **DIMENSIONS:** 435(w) x 474(d) x 192(h)mm **WEIGHT:** 19.6kg

**FEATURES:** YPAO 64-bit sound optimisation; enhanced Cinema DSP HD3; FM & DAB+ tuner; ESS Sabre Pro DACs; XLR stereo input; hi-res audio support; Wi-Fi; Ethernet; USB; Bluetooth; Apple AirPlay; Yamaha MusicCast (multiroom); Android and iOS control apps; HDCP 2.2 on all HDMI; High Resolution Music Enhancer; Compressed Music Restorer; Aventure design; headphone output

## PARTNER WITH



### LEGENDS OF JAZZ: SHOWCASE:

A fine Blu-ray to have in your library, albeit now 12 years old. This marries exhilarating live performances with a cracking Dolby TrueHD presentation that gives Yamaha's AVR a chance to show off its drive and vigour.

voice alone. This predilection for less complex material makes it very appealing with most two-channel music. Pop, jazz and blues compositions come across punchy and engaging, even if high-tempo rock and metal sounds like it is dancing in its own sonic mosh.

Switching between some of the Yamaha's many DSP modes has a profound effect on the sound, both sublime and howling. As with the RX-A3060, the Sci-Fi movie mode allowed the sound to expand in almost every direction, making for a much bigger, more spacious presentation. There are none of the phasey anomalies old-school DSP modes would create and I started to shift towards using the Sci-Fi movie mode as a default.

The flip side is the aural carnage of some of the venue-based DSP modes. I played Sir Simon Rattle's Dolby Digital 5.1 recording of *The Magic Flute* (DVD) using the 'Hall in Vienna' option and found myself wondering if all those famous Austrian composers weren't completely deaf [*one of them was – Ed*].

## A bargain, but...

Those modes are easily avoided and you do have to keep reminding yourself of the RX-A3070's cost. By flagship AVR standards it's a bargain, and it gives away only a few features and watts to peers at even twice its price.

The nine-channel configuration, YPAO room measurement niggles, dated user interface and handset buttons that make me squint are starting to count against it irrespective of price, though. For the action movie enthusiast there is little to complain about here in sonic terms but I never found the RX-A3070 the greatest at resolving detailed effects. This makes for a rather compact soundstage by current standards ■

**3. Connections and speaker terminals are spread out nicely on the AVR's rear panel**

**4. The front flap hides inputs and on-body control options**



## HCC VERDICT



### Yamaha RX-A3070

→ £1,600 → [uk.yamaha.com](http://uk.yamaha.com)

**WE SAY:** A great-value flagship AVR offering solid performance and lush build, but the GUI and remote control are less than impressive. 'Only' nine channels, too.

# Cutting the cost of cinematic bass

**Richard Stevenson** is surprised to see subwoofer specialist REL branching out in a new movie-focused direction. But he isn't complaining



## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
10in, 300W  
entry-level sub

**POSITION:**  
First in a new Serie  
HT range from REL

**PEERS:**  
SVS SB-1000;  
KEF Kube8b;  
Velodyne Impact 12





**IT MIGHT COME** as a surprise that REL has never created a subwoofer purely for movies. Music or 'music and movies', yes, but not LFE alone. The £500 HT/1003 is REL's first foray into pure-bred home cinema heroics.

The story goes like this. When the late Richard Edward Lord wheeled out his first sub-bass systems to an audiophile audience in 1990, they were designed to extend the low-frequency response of stereo music setups. Key to this was a high-level connection, where the sub derives its input from the speaker terminals of the stereo amp.

Every REL woofer since has had these connections and the commensurately complex filter network. Until, that is, the HT/1003, which has an LFE line-level input only. The reason behind this move is also hinted at by the plain vinyl-wrapped finish and single colour option. It's to keep the cost down.

Still, despite a relatively affordable £500 price tag, the HT/1003 aims to hit REL's usually impressive standard. The power plant is a hopefully potent 300W amplifier, the sealed cabinet is heavily built, and its front graced by a gorgeous, REL-designed, glass-fibre 10in driver.

## Bass bargain

The specification is similar to REL's own T9i, for example. That model has a slightly beefier cabinet, multi-layer gloss paint in black or white, chunky aluminium feet, metal trim detailing and those high-level connections. Yet it is also twice the price of the HT/1003. If you only want a sub for AV use and are going to use it in a darkened room, then this new REL is starting to look like a specification bargain.

And it's not a complete visual calamity either. The vinyl wrap is textured and innocuous, and there's a heavy wooden-framed grille you can affix to add to the stealth look. As a rather cool design nod to some of REL's earliest subwoofers, the cabinet is topped with a black glass panel. Don't be tempted to use that glass top as a coffee table though – you might end up spilling something.

In fact, the HT/1003's cabinet can get quite lively when being driven hard. With its bare logo-printed wooden-block feet parked on a laminate floor, I experienced the sub going for an LFE-fuelled walk. Thankfully, these feet can be removed, revealing a threaded socket for traditional spikes or REL's supplied chunky rubber feet. These were my footwear of choice for hard floors, but carpeted rooms will likely need spikes.

Setup controls are basic and are fully manual as there is no remote control. The idea here is that key parameters, like gain, delay, crossover and EQ, will be handled by your AVR or processor. You do, however, get a level control, 0 or 180-degree phase switch and a crossover frequency adjustment. These will be handy if you were to bolt the HT/1003 onto a soundbar, for example.

There is a line-level LFE input and unfiltered loop-through output, along with an on/off/auto standby switch. As a little flourish, all of the legends are written both upright and upside down, so you can see them while leaning over the back of the sub.

A bit of setup tweaking, and the bass-infused *Mad Max: Fury Road* Blu-ray soundmix, got the HT/1003 performing at its best. Fed an LFE signal it sounded tight and lean; switching my AVR's output to LFE+Main, the volume rose and there was notable driver excursion but not absolute bass thunder. Leaning over to flick the REL's phase switch mid engine-roar created what can only be

## SPECIFICATIONS

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 10in CarbonGlas long-throw woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed cabinet  
**FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** Down to 24Hz (-6dB) **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 300W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 319(w) x 347(h) x 351(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 12.6kg

**FEATURES:** LFE input; stereo phono input; stereo phono output; on/off/auto standby; phase, crossover and volume controls; optional HT Air Wireless connection

## PARTNER WITH



### Q ACOUSTICS 7000Lri:

Add the REL HT/1003 to these high-performance yet discreet satellite speakers (£225 per pair) for a premium 2.1 setup. 2.5-way designs, they hide their binding posts within their rotatable (and mountable) feet.

described as an homage to Marty McFly's guitar-amp scene. The HT/1003 suddenly locked in-phase with my main speakers and the system's bass output seemed to quadruple. I leapt back in some aural shock, and then searched frantically for my receiver's remote. There's no shortage of grunt here.

In fact, the REL's prodigious power inspired some measurement. Using only the sub (all other speakers disconnected), I measured the HT/1003's in-room output – from a distance of one metre – up to a whopping 112dB with no audible distortion. This blows any soundbar-supplied subwoofer clean out of the room.

Back in pure LFE mode, the little HT/1003 gives an exceptionally good account of itself all round. It's taut in delivery and slams home effects with lightning-fast transients. There is no wallow or bass overhang, and the use of a sealed cabinet means there is no port noise to identify the location of the woofer.

There is a definite limit to its lowest of low frequencies, though. This can't plumb the depths like a larger or dual-driver design, and I noted a slight 'thumpiness' to its sound when using it purely for music. Yet for LFE use, where a surprising amount of output is between 50Hz-100Hz, this is simply brilliant. REL has clearly tailored the amp/driver combination so that the HT/1003 delivers large LFE impact and cinema-scale SPLs. It's a stunner for £500.

## Movie mayhem

Although the HT/1003 is a departure from purist REL philosophy, the result is an outstanding-value home cinema subwoofer. For AVR owners after a compact, affordable bass box that delivers movie mayhem in spades, look no further. If your budget runs higher, a pair of HT/1003s could be a consideration. And for soundbar users looking for a sonic upgrade, you won't get more bang per buck than this ■

**1. The HT/1003 uses a custom-designed 'CarbonGlas' 10in bass driver**

## HCC VERDICT



### REL HT/1003

→ £500 → [www.rel.net](http://www.rel.net)

**WE SAY:** Some of the trademark REL features have gone, but this bijou bass-maker still makes an impact courtesy of its power, speed, simplicity and price tag.

# A finger on the...



**Steve Withers** adds wireless rears to Bluesound's audiophile Pulse soundbar

When it comes to home cinema audio, perceived wisdom dictates that a centre speaker is essential. But is that really true? Bluesound believes its 4.1 Home Theatre Network can deliver all the channels you need from just a soundbar and a pair of wireless speakers.

Forming the core of this system is the £800 Pulse Soundbar, and it's an impressive piece of kit all on its own. It's beautifully made with curved edges, a black or white matte finish, and a solid aluminium body. Minimalism is the name of the game here. There's a central illuminated status display flanked by metal grilles, but no controls.

The left and right channels each use a 0.75in tweeter, a 2in midrange driver and a 4in woofer with a matching passive radiator. The built-in digital amplifier delivers 20W to each driver, resulting in a total power claim of 120W. If you want to beef up the bass there are options (including the wireless Pulse Sub), but Bluesound believes the Pulse 'bar can hold its own in the low-frequency stakes.

The soundbar itself is quite big, and a height of 14cm makes it difficult to position in front of your TV without blocking the screen. The best solution is to either stand the 'bar beneath the TV on a suitable shelf or wall-mount it; whichever option you choose, Bluesound has you covered with feet for positioning on a stand and a bracket for wall placement.

Connectivity is something of a mixed bag, with the ubiquitous Bluetooth and a USB input for music playback, along with optical digital and phono stereo analogue inputs. But there's not even one HDMI, so no ARC or CEC, and definitely no lossless audio, which is disappointing at this price. As far as multichannel sound goes, the optical digital connection is the only option.

Controlling the soundbar is primarily done via the BluOS app because there's no dedicated remote. Thankfully the soundbar does have an IR receiver, which means you can program it to respond to basic commands (changing the volume, for instance) using your TV remote. This means you don't have to unlock your phone and open an app simply to turn the sound down.





## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
Soundbar/speaker  
wireless 4.1 system

**POSITION:**  
Currently  
Bluesound's only  
soundbar model

**PEERS:**  
Sonos PlayBar;  
LG SJ9;  
Samsung HW-MS750

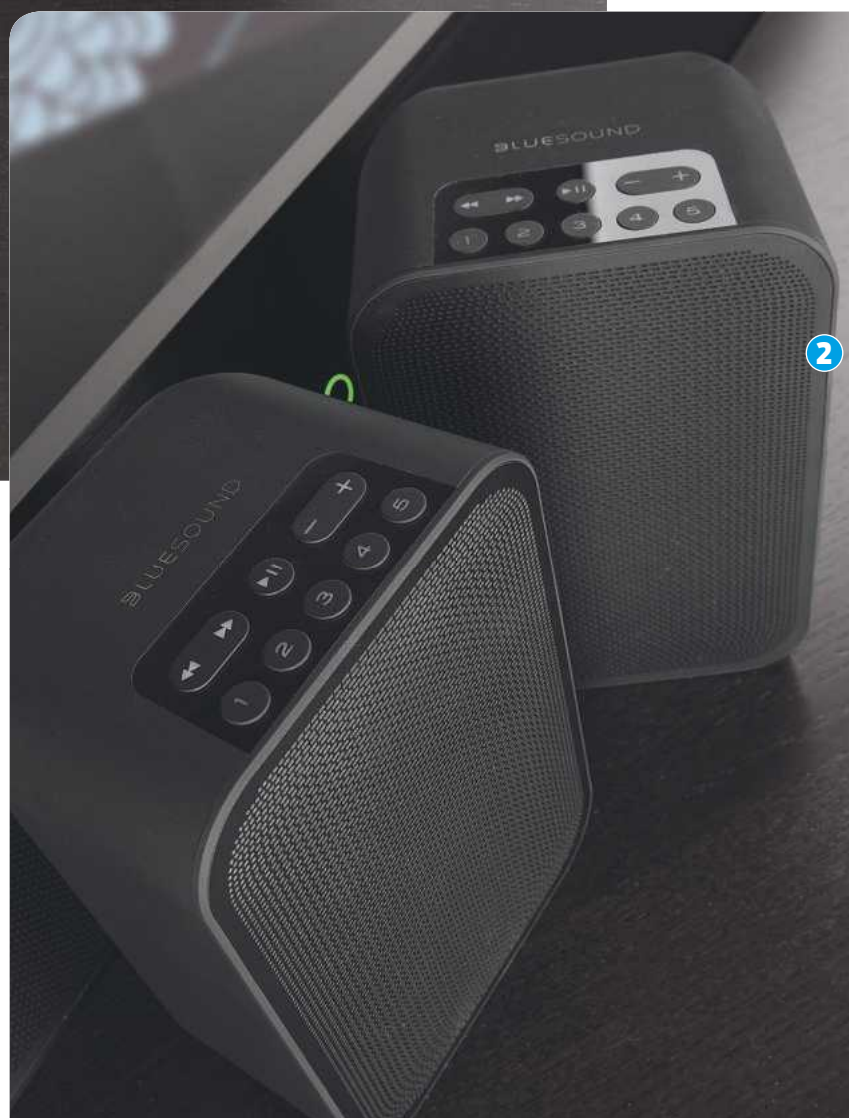
**1.** Bluesound's  
system supports hi-res  
audio streaming,  
including MQA

**2.** Unlike the  
soundbar, the Flex  
speakers have  
physical controls

The BluOS app is well designed with an effective user interface and a slick operation for setup and control. All you need to do is plug the soundbar in and select its Wi-Fi hotspot on your tablet or smartphone. After that you just open the app and follow a few simple instructions. The entire process is very intuitive, taking less than five minutes, and once set up, the soundbar can now form part of a Bluesound multiroom system.

The all-important surround channels in this system are delivered by two Pulse Flex wireless speakers that will set you back £300 a piece, resulting in a total cost for the package of £1,400. The Flex is a compact two-way speaker (1in tweeter, 3.5in woofer), with a similar build quality and styling to the Pulse 'bar. It's worth remembering that whilst the Flex speakers connect with the soundbar wirelessly, they need a power supply for their 20W digital amp, so make sure there are convenient wall sockets.

Adding the Flex speakers to the BluOS app is incredibly easy, and once done you can set up a 4.1 Home Theatre Network. This is also a piece of cake – follow the instructions to create a 'Home Theatre Fixed Group'. >



3



## SPECIFICATIONS

### Pulse soundbar

**DRIVE UNITS:** 2 x 0.75in tweeters; 2 x 2in midrange drivers; 2 x 4in woofers

**AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED):** 120W **CONNECTIONS:** Optical digital audio input; phono stereo analogue input; USB; Ethernet; sub output **DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA:** No/No (Dolby Digital 5.1; DTS 2.0) **SEPARATE SUBWOOFER:** No **REMOTE CONTROL:** No. Bluesound app instead **Dimensions:** 1,073(w) x 141(h) x 70(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 6.8kg

**FEATURES:** Hi-res audio support (FLAC, WAV, AIFF, MQA); 4.1 surround (Dolby Digital) with Flex speakers; BluOS multiroom operating system; aptX Bluetooth; Wi-Fi; wall-mount option; RM Cortex A9 1GHz processor

## PARTNER WITH



**BLUESOUND BP100:** The wireless Flex speakers can function independently of the Pulse soundbar, and this £69 battery pack enables them to be used without a mains power connection. The BluOS app alerts you to when it needs recharging.

After that it's just a question of setting the distances and levels for each speaker and you're good to go, although for the best results I'd recommend using a tape measure and SPL meter.

Now let's address the elephant in the room: the Pulse Soundbar can only decode Dolby Digital 5.1, which means DTS soundtracks are limited to 2.0 channels – something I confirmed using a test disc. Is this really a big deal? If you have a large Blu-ray collection, then the answer is yes, but if you tend to stream content then it's probably a moot point.

## No centre, no worries

As the system lacks a centre channel it seemed sensible to start by testing how it handled regular TV fare such as documentaries, cooking programmes and the news. In these instances – be it narration or a presenter – dialogue is especially important. Overall, the soundbar did an excellent job of delivering clear and focused dialogue, no matter how congested the audio became. As a result I could clearly hear every twang in Tom Kerridge's West Country accent during his new series *Top of the Shop*.

Moving on to something a bit more dynamic, I spun *Batman v Superman* (Blu-ray) and gave the Bluesound combo a chance to really strut its stuff. The murder of Bruce Wayne's parents revealed the soundbar's musicality as it spread the swelling score across the front soundstage, but still precisely rendered the high-frequency tinkle of shell casings hitting the ground. I was genuinely surprised at just how wide a sonic image the soundbar could create, placing sounds where there were clearly no speakers.

Dialogue remained clear no matter how complex the mix became, whilst the deep growl of Batman's voice was also nicely captured. And despite the lack of a separate subwoofer, the system managed to deliver deep bass; I felt every Kryptonian-powered punch as Superman smashed poor Batman from pillar to post. Thunder rolled around the room with an ominous rumble.

The rear channels played their part, too. Effects were steered from speaker to speaker with precision. A good example was the sound of the Batmobile moving through the room as it drove past Superman, and although the soundbar and rear speakers don't use exactly the same drivers, they retained a sense of tonal cohesion. These rear

units are large enough to remain balanced when working in unison with the soundbar, and the wireless network proved robust in operation, with no dropouts or apparent latency.

The chaos that accompanies the freeway sequence in *Deadpool* (Blu-ray) is another fine example of aggressive surround. Here the Flex models were in constant use as bullets ricocheted and the action put me inside a tumbling SUV. There was solid bass extension and a well defined mid-range, keeping *Deadpool*'s quips clear. The system also proved capable of a scale that suits big blockbusters but, as with *BvS*, I was aware that certain scenes lacked the full LF impact a separate woofer will deliver.

The lack of a sub is less of an issue when it comes to music, which gave the soundbar's audiophile credentials a chance to shine. The two-channel design delivered great stereo separation, and Manic Street Preachers' new album *Resistance is Futile* revealed a pleasing level of detail and precise localisation of instruments. The soundbar's built-in bass drivers gave the drums an urgency that propelled the songs, while the solid mid-range revealed an effective crossover that gave the other instruments and the vocals a greater sense of clarity.

## Audio first

The Pulse Soundbar was designed with one eye on the audiophile market, resulting in a superb performance with music and explaining the lack of HDMI connections. It sounds just as good with movies, with a wide front presence, clear vocals and deep bass, and the easy-to-setup wireless network is robust, allowing the Flex speakers to deliver an immersive surround experience. However, the lack of DTS 5.1 decoding (and a dedicated sub) puts this soundbar at a disadvantage to the competition. It's worth considering on sound quality alone but for multichannel thrills there are better-priced alternatives ■

**3. Recessed rear connections are digital and analogue audio in, USB, Ethernet and a subwoofer output**

## HCC VERDICT



### Bluesound Pulse/Flex 4.1

→ £1,400 → [www.bluesound.com](http://www.bluesound.com)

**WE SAY:** A superb sonic performance is tempered by the lack of DTS 5.1 support, while the absence of any HDMI connection is hard to justify at this price.





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**FrontRow™ Home Cinema Seating**, 69 London Road, Southborough, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN4 0PA

Richard Stevenson finds these in-ceiling speakers easy to fit and lovely to listen to

# Focal has Flax appeal



## AV INFO

### PRODUCT:

Coaxial in-ceiling speaker with 8in midbass driver

### POSITION:

Largest in-ceiling 300 Series model

### PEERS:

KEF Ci200RR-THX; GoldenEar Invisia 650

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**1.** A 1in inverted dome tweeter is centrally mounted to the 8in midbass driver

For the ultimate home cinema install, an in-ceiling speaker is appealing. And if you thought such models were all about convenience and looking pretty rather than performance, you should hunt down Focal's 300 ICW 8 and have a listen...

This is the largest of the brand's Flax driver-based 300 Series installation range. At £400 each – and hence £1,600 to properly top off a Dolby Atmos array – they are patently not a budget solution. That said, in comparison to standalone Atmos upfiring modules, the price isn't extortionate either.

This series distils a whole lot of Focal's Aria series technology into a coaxial, two-way installation speaker. Most obvious is the distinctive buff-coloured driver formed with fibres of natural flax. This makes for a light, rigid cone that also happens to be more eco-friendly than drivers hewn from polypropylene plastic.

Complementing the 8in midbass cone is Focal's 1in inverted dome magnesium-aluminium alloy tweeter, also derived from the Aria lineup. This is mounted on a fixed central pod.

Like many coaxial in-ceiling speakers, the Focals have directional tweeter pods to 'aim' high-frequency sound. Yet that might not be the best idea in an Atmos setup. The ICW 8's off-axis performance is incredibly smooth, so leaving them pointing straight down gives the best overall balance at all seating positions.

If you do end up right below the speaker, or on-axis to the tweeter, they are going to sound rather bright but Focal has that in hand. An 'HF trim' switch on the rear of the chassis cuts treble by 3dB, giving a much smoother output. The same switch can also boost treble by 3dB for over-dampened rooms or listening a long way off-axis.

### Mounting excitement

Ease of installation is a key feature of Focal's 300 Series, making DIY in-ceiling Atmos about as easy as the project gets. The mounting frame is separate from the driver and is secured into place with four sprung-loaded clamps. You don't even need a screwdriver.

You do have to cut a large hole (264mm in diameter) in your ceiling first though. Focal supplies a cardboard template for this but don't get confused by the other circular card in the box that offers advice on fitting the clamps. That is 15mm smaller than the actual template. I found that out the hard way, which will teach me to read the manual first.

Positioning the hole, you need to ensure the speaker falls between joists with room for the clamps, and that you have the 12.5cm or more mounting depth required for the ICW 8s. If you are using large-diameter speaker cable you'll need to factor this in to your measurements too, as Focal's speaker terminals are at the very rear of the driver chassis. If you have access to the room above, lifting the carpet and floorboards to better see where you are installing the speaker will be worth the effort.

Having planned speaker position and cable routing, draw around the template and cut the hole slowly with



3



a dedicated plasterboard handsaw. Go cautiously and you will feel if you hit something other than plasterboard, such as a pipe. There is plenty of tolerance on the size of the hole so don't worry too much about following the template with millimetre precision.

The lightweight frame then slots into the hole and the four clamps push back and inwards to lock it to the ceiling. To comply with current building regulations, now would be the time to install a fire hood in the void above.

The speaker's sprung-loaded bare-wire binding posts are fairly easy to connect to when you are up a ladder holding a hefty driver in one hand. The driver then slots into the frame and turns 45 degrees to lock into place. It really is that simple.

**'With *X-Men: Apocalypse*, the ICW 8s deliver excitement by the bucket-load. There's a real sense of dynamism'**

In each box you will also find a magnetic shield, so you can paint the ceiling without getting emulsion all over your speaker, and two white grilles. One is circular and the other square, the choice being purely cosmetic. Both have a removable felt mask if you want to see the Flax drivers peeking through. With a dozen magnets holding the grilles in place, they are not going to end up on your head during the midst of an *Expendables* movie marathon.

### A bit of DIY

Before getting on to performance, a little explanation on how I actually test in-ceiling and in-wall speakers. The units are installed into a purpose-built false wall and false ceiling, built into the fabric of a wood-framed building. The main wall and ceiling surface used is a fixed 'baffle' of plywood; the ply sheets have several large square holes cut out to cater for small single-driver models all the way to huge in-wall subwoofers. Each hole is covered by a larger plywood plate fitted with a rubber gasket to replicate the open backed/sealed baffle environment an install speaker must work in.

The cover plates are interchangeable, allowing a mounting hole to be cut in a new plate for each new install speaker. With a single speaker installed I measure impulse and pink noise performance, on-axis and at 15-degree increments off-axis, to get an idea of frequency response. After this, a second speaker in stereo

### SPECIFICATIONS

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 8in Flax midbass cone; 1 x 1in inverted dome alloy tweeter  
**ENCLOSURE:** Open-backed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 48Hz-28kHz  
**SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 90dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 25W-150W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 299(w) x 299(h) x 127(d)mm **CUT OUT:** 264mm diameter  
**WEIGHT:** 5.1kg

**FEATURES:** Separate mounting frame; tool-free installation clamps; +/-3dB HF trim switch; supplied with paint shield, plus circular and square white paintable grilles

### PARTNER WITH



**ANNABELLE: CREATION:** Fright flicks and immersive Dolby Atmos audio go hand-in-hand, and this recent spooky-doll prequel (Blu-ray) is no exception – the sound designers revel in throwing chilling effects into the height plane.

configuration is fitted and I let rip with music and down-mixed movies to get a feel for how they actually sound.

Performance wise, here Focal really shakes up the notion that in-ceiling speakers just need to make some noise and be reliable. With stereo music these are very evenly balanced off-axis and deliver a vigorous sound that would give plenty of expensive bookshelf speakers a run for their money. Bass extends usefully down to almost 50Hz (-6dB), ensuring a full-range experience, and the top-end is detailed without being frisky or bright. Lana Del Rey's *Lust for Life* CD comes across moody, warm and engaging with plenty of punch on the rap-style tracks.

Switching to *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Blu-ray) down-mixed to stereo, I was so impressed by the sound I decided to hook up the REL HT/1003 (see p46) for LFE. The partnership was frankly outstanding. Dialogue was crisp and articulate, effects had detail and impact (if not cast around the room) and the sound hung together even at very high volumes. As the roof comes off Sydney Opera House and the bridge explodes, the ICW 8s deliver excitement by the bucket-load. There's a real sense of dynamism, again aided by that full-range delivery.

### In-ceiling innovation

Overall, I think Focal's 300 ICW 8s are superb for the money. They measure well, sound rich but detailed, deliver high SPLs and, thanks to that innovative tool-free clamp, are among the easiest to fit in-ceiling loudspeakers on the market.

Focal has delivered an audiophile speaker in a sleek, build-in format, and its neutral balance should make it a good choice for Dolby Atmos overheads irrespective of your main speaker brand. For those after a completely in-wall/in-ceiling solution, the 300 Series also features three-way LCR and two-way surround in-wall models – I'd like to hear those in action, too... ■

**3. Focal's HF switch trims or boosts treble by 3dB**

### HCC VERDICT



#### Focal 300 ICW 8

→ £400 (each) → [www.focal.com](http://www.focal.com)

**WE SAY:** These sound dynamic and engaging, are easy to install, and will match a wide range of partnering speakers. A little on the large side, but the resulting performance is worth it.



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**ACOUSTICS**



# Sub-£1,500 4K projectors

An influx of well-priced models means there's never been a better time to upgrade to a UHD HDR beamer. But can **John Archer** pick a favourite from four contenders?



## ACER V6810

A step down from the brand's V7 series, but with a low price tag to match



## BENQ W1700

The chassis design certainly catches the eye – but what about its images?



## OPTOMA UHD40

Will the brightest model on test pack the most punch?



## VIEWSONIC PX727-4K

US/Taiwan brand aims mass-market with its 4K debut





# Acer V6810

Below the brand's laser- and lamp-based 7 series models sits this affordable entry-level option



**THE ACER V6810** kicks this group test off in style. First because it only costs £1,100, and second because it's really rather good. Not that its inner beauty is obvious from its exterior. The gridded side panels and cluttered top edge create a messy presence on your coffee table, despite the cute white finish.

Connections comprise two HDMI inputs (one with 4K HDR support), an RS-232 control port, a D-Sub PC port, audio input/output, a 12V trigger and a powered USB socket. These connections repeat in almost identical form right across this roundup.

As does the V6810's use of single-chip DLP projection technology – currently the only method around to get 4K projection at a mass-market price. I must stress that the DLP approach doesn't use a native 4K pixel count, instead 'flashing' each of its DLP mirrors repeatedly for every image frame to create what some would call only a virtual 4K pixel count. Yet images appear much more like 4K than HD, and the tech is certified as such by the Consumer Technology Association.

Optical zoom is limited to 1.2x and there's no vertical image shifting. You may therefore need to use digital keystone correction to straighten the picture, even though this essentially distorts the image.

I settled on the V6810's Movie preset as the best home cinema option, backed up by the 'Low' option of an unexpected 'EOTF' (Electro-Optical Transfer Function) feature.

This lets you select between three baseline HDR brightness settings. For me, Low delivers the richest colours and deepest blacks. But the option is there if you'd rather watch generally brighter HDR pictures at the expense of some dynamic range.

The V6810 also lets you introduce colour, skin tone and sharpness enhancements. However, aside from maybe nudging the Super Resolution setting up a bit, the V6810's pictures really don't need any help.

## Welcome to the jungle

Its colours, in particular, look superb. Rich tones in *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (Ultra HD Blu-ray), such as the greens of the jungle and the characters' 'abilities charts', really pop. The brightest and darkest colour tones alike contain startling amounts of detailing and blending. Skin tones look both natural and largely free of blocking/striping issues.

The V6810's so-called ColorPurity technology presumably contributes here. This combines a 'special' colour wheel design with advanced lamp control to produce a wider colour gamut and enriched contrast. This colour wheel prowess also restrains DLP's rainbow effect, even over stand-out vivid picture elements such as the flickering torches lining the path to the Jaguar statue. And this sequence underlines the palpable difference even budget projectors can now deliver between SDR and HDR.

Despite producing the softest 4K pictures in this group test, the V6810 still shows that the single-chip DLP approach to 4K really works. Skin, hair and clothing minutiae on show are way beyond anything you'd see on an HD PJ.

There are areas where the V6810's budget nature shows. First, in what will become a recurring theme, its black levels aren't brilliant. There's a noticeable grey pall over *Jumanji*'s night-time scenes, even though blacks are marginally better here than on the Acer's roundup rivals. Rapid camera pans see the image look rather ragged, too, while the output of the built-in 10W speaker is uninspiring.

Let's not finish on a downbeat note, though. Take the Acer V6810's £1,100 price into account, and the good far outweighs the bad.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** No **4K:** Yes, 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs (one HDCP 2.2); D-Sub PC port; RS-232; powered USB; audio input/output; 12V trigger **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,200 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 10,000:1 **ZOOM:** 1.2x **DIMENSIONS:** 343(w) x 124.6(h) x 258(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4kg

**FEATURES:** Single-chip DLP projector; 10W mono audio output; up to 15,000-hour claimed lamp life; EOTF setting options; Acer ColorPurity technology



# BenQ W1700

Easily the most eye-catching model of our quartet, but do its images also stand out?



**FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF** BenQ's W1700 are strong. The glossy white finish of its top edge and curvy sides contrasts neatly with its grey fascia, while the addition of a yellow stripe around its lens edge makes it look more fun than its rivals.

Yet as with Acer's V6810, it isn't exactly overloaded with setup flexibility. Again it only manages 1.2x optical zoom, and there's no horizontal or vertical image shifting. You'll either need to physically align the PJ with your screen/wall or use the projector's automatic keystone feature, which isn't ideal.

The W1700 has the same connections suite as the Acer V6810, but is unique in this four-way test in offering 3D playback – although, inevitably, we weren't supplied with any glasses that would have enabled us to check this feature out. Note that 3D resolution here is capped at 1080p24 – the PJ can't upscale 3D Blu-rays to a 4K pixel count.

BenQ's audio inputs feed a built-in 'resonant chamber' sound system that delivers a more powerful, rounded sound than you'd expect from a 5W speaker.

The W1700 features a lens with low-dispersion coating to minimise colour errors, and carries an 'Auto HDR Natural Color Rendition' engine designed to counter the pushed reds and greens that HDR projectors can suffer with. There's also processing aimed at retaining greyscale accuracy and colour balance during dark HDR scenes, as well as

increasing the punch of the brightest picture areas. So it seems clear that BenQ is taking the W1700's HDR duties seriously, despite its affordable price tag. This seriousness is mostly backed up by its performance.

## Bold and vibrant

Daylight exterior sequences in the *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* 4K Blu-ray instantly reveal the W1700 to be remarkably bright. Skies look exceptionally bold and vibrant, making them seem more lifelike than they ever could in standard dynamic range mode.

This brightness doesn't just materialise in *Jumanji*'s picture peaks, either; there's also a higher average brightness level throughout the film than you usually get with PJs. This stops the night-time race to the Jaguar statue from looking too dull.

The W1700 also impresses with its sharpness. Close-ups of each 'game character' when they first arrive in *Jumanji*'s jungle world appear detailed and sharp.

Motion is clean and natural during the movie's Rhino stampede sequence, and colours throughout are surprisingly lush considering the W1700 doesn't carry any wide colour technologies.

It also suffers less with single-chip DLP's rainbow effect colour striping issue than I'd have expected from such a bright model, and runs pretty quietly while using the best-quality Smart Eco lamp mode.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Active shutter **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160  
**HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs (one HDCP 2.2); 12V trigger; D-Sub PC port; audio input/output **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,200 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 10,000:1 **zoom:** 1.2x  
**DIMENSIONS:** 353(w) x 135(h) x 272(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 4.2kg

**FEATURES:** 5W audio system; 10,000-hour claimed lamp life in Eco mode, 8,000 hours in Smart Eco mode; Auto HDR Natural Color Rendition engine; CinematicColor technology; Cinema Optimized HDR engine

The W1700's colours do lose their usually commendable balance with very aggressively mastered (to 4,000 nits, rather than the usual 1,000 nits) HDR titles such as fantasy flick *Pan*. Its biggest weakness, though, is its uninspiring contrast performance.

During the *Jumanji* sequence where Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson races up a torchlit path, for instance, the night skies and dark jungle look distinctly grey rather than black. This issue makes dark scenes feel flat and unconvincing – despite the projector's processing keeping shadow detailing visible amid the greyness. All-round, however, there's plenty to admire here.

# Optoma UHD40

Brighter and better-specified than the competition – but also more expensive



**DESPITE SELLING FOR** just £1,300 at the time of writing, the UHD40 boasts some eye-catching on-paper advantages.

For instance, its brightness is rated at 2,400 Lumens – the highest figure in this roundup. Its claimed dynamic contrast ratio is also a huge 500,000:1.

The UHD40 also carries a stereo 10W audio system (but actually this doesn't sound as powerful as the BenQ W1700's 5W 'resonant chamber'), and slightly more optical zoom than any of its rivals (1.3x vs 1.2x). Even better, it provides a small but very welcome amount of vertical image shifting, reducing the likelihood of you having to use keystone correction during installation.

Both of the UHD40's HDMI ports support 4K, although only one also supports HDR. Elsewhere there's an RS-232 control port, a 12V trigger, a powered USB, and a D-Sub PC socket.

The UHD40 isn't the prettiest model here. Its grilled sides give it a slightly industrial appearance, while the two-tone top panel looks cluttered and bitty.

While largely devoid of video processing options, the UHD40 needs to be handled with a fair bit of setup care. In particular, always have Dynamic Black switched on for HDR; without it black level performance drops dramatically.

I'd also recommend using different HDR settings for different HDR content. 'HDR

Standard' delivers a fairly high average brightness level well suited to relatively 'mild' HDR material mastered to around 1,000 nits. The 'HDR Detail' setting, however, takes down the average brightness to make space for more extreme brightness peaks. I'd recommend using that for more aggressive HDR movies.

## The green, green grass

As hoped for, the UHD40 delivers excellent levels of detail and sharpness with my *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* 4K Blu-ray. There's oodles of leaf and grass detail in the jungle's trees and clearings, plus delicious 4K levels of texturing in faces, hair and clothing.

Motion looks impressively natural, too, suffering minimal judder and no significant blurring even during the high-octane helicopter chase sequence. The image does not need to be static to look 4K.

The UHD40's HDR pictures are, as its specifications implied, the brightest here. This helps sell the step up from SDR to HDR, and allows the projector to resolve slightly more detail in the brightest HDR areas.

Colours look bolder too, although you should note that the UHD40 can't really escape its core REC.709 colour palette. As a result, some of *Jumanji*'s most vibrant footage – especially scenes back in the real world towards the film's end – can look peaky.

Choosing the best setting between HDR Detail and HDR Standard helps in this regard.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** No **4K:** Yes, 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs (both 4K capable; one HDR); RS-232; D-Sub PC port; powered USB; 12V trigger **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,400 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 500,000:1 (dynamic) **ZOOM:** 1.3x **DIMENSIONS:** 392(w) x 118(h) x 281(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 5.22kg

**FEATURES:** Vertical lens shift; various HDR presets; six-speed colour wheel, 15,000-hour claimed lamp life in Dynamic mode and 10,000 hours in Eco mode; colour management system

Try toggling between the two if what you're watching really doesn't look natural.

Again, the biggest weakness here is black level response. Even if you're careful with the UHD40's settings, dark scenes can feel grey and flat, while still retaining shadow detail. Yet the image's high brightness meant I didn't feel as badly impacted by its black levels as I was with, say, BenQ's W1700 – and its black level performance is more assured with standard dynamic range images.

With its fulsome feature count and overall picture prowess, Optoma's UHD40 is the current leader of the pack with just one contender to go...



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# ViewSonic PX727-4K

This budget model shares some very similar traits with its rivals...



**IT BECOMES CLEAR** pretty fast that the PX727-4K shares a serious amount of heritage with both the BenQ and, especially, Acer models in this group test.

It offers the same 1.2x zoom. There's no vertical image shifting. Its claimed brightness is the same 2,200 Lumens. It's got the same key connections: two HDMI (one for 4K), one 3.5mm audio input, one D-Sub PC port, an RS-232 and a 12V trigger. It even shares the BenQ's yellow ring around its lens edge. Most strikingly of all, it has exactly the same menus and adjustments as the Acer.

So does that mean it's exactly the same as the Acer? Not necessarily. First, the PX727-4K claims a contrast ratio of 12,000:1, vs 10,000:1 on the BenQ and Acer models. It also boasts of SuperColour technology – although the way this technology combines a bespoke colour wheel design with dynamic lamp control, to deliver a wider colour gamut and enhance contrast and detailing, sounds mighty similar to what Acer's ColorPurity system promises...

The PX727-4K's MoviePro menu does exactly as the Acer's does, letting you activate colour enhancement, skin tone adjustment and Super Resolution features. Again, I don't really think you need to use any of these features, although a 3-4 setting for Super Resolution can marginally improve the sharpness of the *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* 4K Blu-ray picture without causing edge noise or excessive grain.

The PX727-4K also provides the same three 'EOTF' options, with the same results. As with the Acer, for me the Low setting delivered the richest colours and deepest black levels.

Having found the PX727-4K and Acer V6810 close enough in their performance characteristics to end up selecting exactly the same preferred picture settings, are there any differences in the way they perform? Actually, it seemed to me that there are. Even if they're pretty minor.

## It's a close call

Three of the differences go in the ViewSonic's favour. First, its motion looks more natural. There's no repeat of the rather billowy look to camera pans I witnessed with Acer's V6810. Second, the ViewSonic's picture looks a touch sharper, a situation perhaps helped by its focus ring being much more sensitive and easy to adjust.

Finally, when sunlight reflects on the actor's faces in *Jumanji*, the PX727-4K avoids some slight bleaching in their highlighted skin tones that was apparent on the V6810.

The one thing the Acer has in its favour is that I found its contrast slightly better, despite the ViewSonic claiming a higher contrast ratio. The PX727-4K's blacks look a little shallower and peak whites a little duller, using the same settings.

Both projectors are similar where colour is concerned. There's perhaps a touch more

refinement in the ViewSonic's pictures when looking at facial skin tones and, say, the clothes and backgrounds of the *Jumanji* market sequence. But the key point is that both seem to stretch their tones further than the BenQ and Optoma models. As with the Acer, I hardly noticed any rainbow effect at all with this PJ.

There's also parity when it comes to the PX727-4K's audio. It too uses a single 10W speaker, and it too lacks the rounded tones and sound dispersion qualities heard from the Optoma and, especially, BenQ models. This is the cheapest PJ test, however, meaning you may be happier investing extra cash in an external sound system.

I was impressed with the Acer's pictures at £1,100 and the PX727-4K's are more or less the same (if not slightly better), while currently costing you less.

**3D:** No **4K:** Yes, 3,840 x 2160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs (one HDCP 2.2); powered USB; D-Sub PC port; RS-232; audio input/output; 12V trigger **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,200 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 12,000:1 **zoom:** 1.2x **DIMENSIONS:** 332(w) x 135(h) x 261(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4.2kg

**FEATURES:** SuperColour technology; EOTF adjustments; skin tone adjustment; resolution booster; up to 15,000-hour claimed lamp life



# Final standings

**PUTTING THIS QUARTET** of affordable 4K projectors through their paces has been fun. All are good to watch.

There are caveats to this, inevitably. No model provides a stellar black level, for instance. Also, while they all deliver a clear performance lift with HDR over SDR, none of them deliver a full-blooded HDR experience.

But they've done enough to convince me that the future for all but the very cheapest HD projectors is looking bleak.

There are striking similarities across all four, but it is possible to establish a running order. This finds the BenQ W1700 at the rear, because it doesn't stand out enough from the more affordable models to justify its price. Unless you're a 3D fan, in which case it has unique appeal.

The Acer V6810 and ViewSonic PX727-4K in third and second place respectively are identical in many ways. There are marginal differences in performance though, with the Acer winning on contrast, while the ViewSonic pips it on colour and, especially, motion. With little in it in performance terms, though, the ViewSonic's lower £1,000 price wins the day.

## Every little helps

Sneaking into first place by a nose is the pricier Optoma UHD40. Its extra setup flexibility is a major draw amidst these relatively 'casual' projectors. More importantly, its extreme sharpness and uniquely high brightness help it to unearth that little bit more of what the 4K HDR format is all about ■



## HCC VERDICT

### Optoma UHD40

→ £1,300 → [www.optoma.co.uk](http://www.optoma.co.uk)

★★★★★

### ViewSonic PX727-4K

→ £1,000 → [www.viewsonic.com/uk](http://www.viewsonic.com/uk)

★★★★★

### Acer V6810

→ £1,100 → [www.acer.com/uk](http://www.acer.com/uk)

★★★★★

### BenQ W1700

→ £1,200 → [www.benq.co.uk](http://www.benq.co.uk)

★★★★★

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# Flatscreen fantasy

Samsung's smaller, more affordable new Q9FN QLED TV picks up where its bigger brother left off. **John Archer** reports

**AS WE DISCOVERED** in our previous issue, Samsung is well and truly back in the high-end TV game. Its QE65Q9FN screen combined a direct LED lighting system (where LEDs sit right behind the screen, not around its edges) with local dimming and the brand's proprietary 'QLED' Quantum Dot technology. This delivered a high dynamic range image worthy of the highest praise.

Happily, the 55in QE55Q9FN mostly carries the same premium swagger – but it does leave me wanting a little bit more...

## A better fit

The Q9FN design actually works better on this 55in set than it did on the 65in version. Here, the well-balanced single-bar stand seems to harmonise more elegantly with the skinny metallic grey bezel.

A slender cable provides the screen with both its power and AV feeds (which, when you think about it, is rather clever). It plugs into an external connections box which stores the TV's tuner, connections and power block.

This box is seriously chunky compared with the svelte screen, but hopefully you can tuck it away in a bit of furniture or kit rack.

A final nifty aspect of the TV's design is the way you can display pre-loaded artwork – or your own photographs – on the screen in a low-powered screen-saver mode when you're not watching it.

The QE55Q9FN's connections include four HDMI 2.0 ports, three USBs and Wi-Fi/Ethernet network options, while connected features are handled by Samsung's latest smart system. This introduces numerous improvements over last year's already strong interface, including greater sophistication when it comes to voice control/recognition, and improved integration of the TV tuner into the content browsing system.

Available apps include the catchup services of the UK's main terrestrial broadcasters, and 4K/HDR versions of Netflix, Amazon and YouTube. Plus there's Smart Things, a new app that lets you monitor and control compatible smart devices and appliances on your network.

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
55in 4K HDR TV  
with full array local  
dimming LCD display

**POSITION:**  
At the top of  
Samsung's current  
TV range

**PEERS:**  
LG OLED55C8;  
Sony KD-65ZD9;  
Panasonic  
TX-65EZ952



Unfortunately, I don't own a connected vacuum cleaner so couldn't put this to the test.

Despite having no visible forward-facing speakers, this screen still produces a rich, powerful, dynamic soundstage that draws you into whatever content you're watching. It's not a substitute for a genuine cinema setup, of course, and most of that soundstage appears to lurk behind the screen rather than in front of it.

**'The eerily rich colours of daylight sequences in *It* on 4K Blu-ray are fully saturated and wonderfully dynamic'**

### Master of dark arts

The shift to a direct lighting system with local dimming allows the QE55Q9FN to mix Samsung's signature extreme, HDR brightness with much more satisfying black levels than witnessed from the brand's 2017 TVs.

Watching the sequence in the 4K Blu-ray of *It* where Patrick Hockstetter searches the sewers, the almost complete darkness that surrounds him looks pretty much as deep and even on this LCD screen as it does on an OLED TV. There's no greyness over black areas, and when Patrick sparks his cigarette lighter, any hint of tell-tale LED light blooming around it is negligible.

At the other end of the light spectrum, the QE55Q9FN, like its larger stablemate, delivers huge amounts of punch. I measured an HDR light output of around 2,200 nits – a very respectable figure, although actually not quite as searing as the 2,400-nit figure of the QE65 model.

This equates to spectacular results with the ultra-bright 4K Blu-ray of *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In everything from the intensity of the sun-bleached desert skies, to reflections cast from the film's acres of car bodywork and chrome, this TV captures the full light range of this aggressively mastered title.

This year's Samsung QLED TVs use narrower Quantum Dot wavelengths to refine their colour performance compared to 2017's QLED debutantes. With the *It* 4K Blu-ray, the almost eerily rich colours of daylight sequences in the town of Derry are fully saturated and wonderfully dynamic. This holds true, moreover, even in the most intensely bright parts of the image; there's none of the slight bleaching effect you may witness with the brightest colours of an OLED display. Nor is there any intrusive detail and tone 'clipping' in areas of peak brightness.

Naturally, the QE55Q9FN delivers 4K discs and streams with impressive sharpness. Coupled with the wide colour range, it really sells the benefits of a native 4K screen. This is especially true, strangely, in background areas, helping largescale shots, such as the crowd scenes outside Immortan Joe's cave in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, enjoy a phenomenal sense of depth.

With this TV also doing a fine job of both upconverting HD content to 4K, and providing a strikingly dramatic option for converting standard dynamic range sources

### SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** No **4K:** Yes, 3,840 x 2160 **HDR:** Yes, HDR10; HDR10+; HLG **TUNER:** Yes, Freeview HD; Freesat HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI 2.0 inputs; 3 x USB ports; RF input; satellite input; Ethernet port **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 60W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,000 nits **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,231(w) x 707(h) x 39(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 19.5kg

**FEATURES:** USB multimedia playback; network multimedia playback; Q Engine processing; anti-reflective screen filter; Samsung QLED technology; Eden smart platform; Smart Things home monitoring and control; Bluetooth headphone connectivity; built-in Wi-Fi

### PARTNER WITH



**SAMSUNG HW-N650:** Fresh for 2018 is this Samsung soundbar/subwoofer combi (priced around £650) that incorporates a new 'wedge' design for improved sonic dispersion, and will hook up wirelessly to the Q9 TV. Full review in our next issue.

to HDR, I'm left with just a handful of picture niggles – and they're the same ones I discussed when auditioning the 65in version.

First, the TV doesn't support the Dolby Vision HDR format, and isn't going to get support added via firmware. It is, however, compatible with the rival HDR10+ format supported by Amazon Video and, we're assured, upcoming 20th Century Fox 4K Blu-rays. Second, bright highlights within otherwise extremely dark areas can look a bit dull compared with the same content on an OLED display. Third, watching the TV from much of an angle causes black levels and colour saturations to wane, and suddenly reveals clear backlight blooming around bright objects – so consider where you will be positioning this TV before investing in it. Finally, Samsung's motion processing causes some slight digital artefacting, even on its lowest power setting. Personally I'd say switch it off, even though this leaves behind a touch of judder.

### Summing it up

So, should you buy it? Well, it seems to me that the 65in Q9FN model (which sells for around £3,800) represents better value than its 55in sibling when considered against its main competition: OLED TVs. And for me the charms of Samsung's QLED technology deserve to be seen on a bigger screen than 55in.

If you can't accommodate a 65in display, though, or £3,000 is as far as your budget will stretch, the QE55Q9FN does at least cost no more than its closest rival, LG's OLED55C8. So maybe this is just the price you have to pay for the best 55in LCD TV there's yet been ■

**1. The set supports HDR10+, but not its Dolby Vision rival**

**2. Samsung claims the QE55Q9FN reaches 100 per cent of the DCI-P3 colour space**



### HCC VERDICT



#### Samsung QE55Q9FN

→ £3,000 → [www.samsung.co.uk](http://www.samsung.co.uk)

**WE SAY:** Unprecedented brightness, colour and – by LCD standards – black levels make this a supremely impressive 55in 4K HDR TV. It is expensive, though!

# Hit the lights!

DreamScreen is a self-installed LED mood-lighting upgrade for any flatscreen TV, but it's not quite as immediately alluring as Ambilight, says **Steve May**



DreamScreen's oval hub provides a 3-in, 1-out HDMI connection

**THE DREAMSCREEN 4K** is a smart mood-lighting kit for those who cast envious glances at Philips' Ambilight technology, but have rather less illuminative screens of their own.

The package, the latest in a line of DreamScreen lighting solutions, comprises a collection of linked LED lighting strips with a 4K-capable HDMI hub. Control comes via a dedicated app (for iOS and Android), which requires the hub to be Wi-Fi networked.

DreamScreen offers three options for TVs of various sizes: Classic caters for smallscreen owners with sets between 35in-45in; Mega (reviewed here) is for 45in-65in panels; Xtreme copes with

65in-80in screens. The packs include 12, 18 and 24 LED strips respectively, each offering a mix of vertical and horizontal pads.

There's enough in each pack to completely encircle your screen. Self-adhesive, they affix to the back panel, although the end

result is hardly neat and tidy. The back of your set soon looks like it's on life-support.

## Let it shine

DreamScreen offers three lighting modes. Video is the nearest to classic Ambilight and pulsates to screen content, splashing colours which match televised action. Music comprises a quartet of visualisers which cause lights to pulsate to the beat, while Ambient offers a solid colour wash, or 'scene.'

The oval hub is small, but comes with a power brick, and features three HDMI inputs plus one output. A 3.5mm audio jack can be used for the music mode, as an alternative to HDMI, and there's a microUSB port. An LED lighting input allows you to extend your system away from the TV by adding additional DreamScreen SideKick lights.

Unfortunately, installation proves frustrating, as the app leaves a lot to be desired. I found connecting it to the hub to be an exasperating experience, prompting error messages ('It appears the DreamScreen 4K is experiencing a communications error') or inexplicably wrapping up and looping me back to the start of the process. Eventually, after a few power cycles, the hub lurched online and the app began functioning.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs; 1 x HDMI output; 3.5mm audio input; microUSB input  
**4K HDR PASSTHROUGH:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 up to 60Hz

**REMOTE CONTROL:** No. Dedicated smart device app (iOS, Android)

**HUB DIMENSIONS:** 80(w) x 90(h) x 15(d)mm  
**HUB WEIGHT:** 80g

**FEATURES:** Wi-Fi connection on Hub; Video, Music and Ambient modes; Brightness and Colour Saturation control; compatible with DreamScreen SideKick LED lights; HDMI cable supplied

For this audition, I sat the DreamScreen hub (which supports HDCP 2.2 copy protection and ARC HDMI) between an AV receiver and screen, using an Ultra HD Blu-ray player and Amazon Fire TV box as sources, routed through the receiver. While the former player worked fine, delivering HDR10 content intact, the latter inexplicably glitched in and out, making it unwatchable. With the hub removed from the circuit, the Amazon Fire TV box worked flawlessly. Will other sources behave just as unpredictably? It's difficult to say.

Performance is similarly mixed.

The Video mode, which sets out to mimic onscreen colours, doesn't always convince. I experienced a time delay between onscreen action and the changing LED hues. While Philips' Ambilight can seem almost seamless, the DreamScreen 4K appears to trail behind, and I found the effect quite distracting. The Ambient mode is much better. Using a colour wheel on the app, you can select the hue that works best for you, be it a vivid splash or white bias lighting. There are also cute preset scenes; Fireside appropriately flickers orange and red, as if you have logs aflame behind your flatscreen, while Twinkle alternates white LEDs for a fairy light experience.

## Illuminating idea

As a substitute for Philips' well-known tech, the DreamScreen 4K is a neat idea and does a passable job, provided you're prepared for the faff of lacing up the LED strips and an app experience that might not always be plain-sailing (depending on your sources). It's definitely at its best as a solid ambient mood-light, or scene-setter for your next psychedelic party, but it's not exactly cheap ■

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:** Content-adaptive LED TV lighting kit

**POSITION:** Joined by HD and a customisable iteration in the DreamScreen stable

**PEERS:** Philips Ambilight; DIY LED solution

## HCC VERDICT



### DreamScreen 4K Mega

→ £260 → [www.dreamscreentv.com](http://www.dreamscreentv.com)

**WE SAY:** This TV add-on can impress, but the end result isn't quite as slick as we hoped. File it under 'fun' rather than 'fantastic'.





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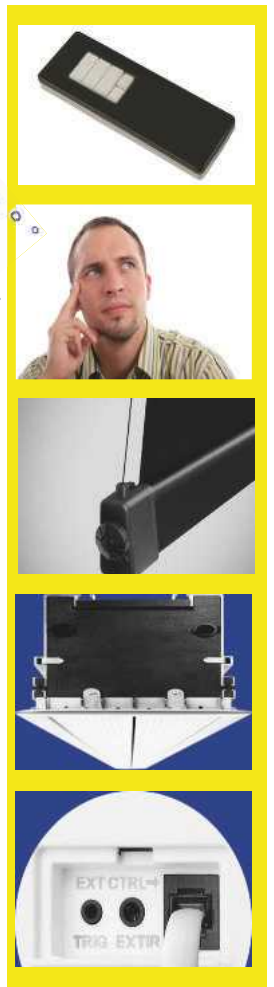
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SETC240WSF-ATR	2340 x 1320	92" x 52"	2935 x 155 x 170	16:9
SETC270WSF-ATR	2670 x 1500	105" x 59"	3245 x 155 x 170	16:9

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# Ear's an idea

These over-ear/in-ear hybrid headphones 'profile' your unique listening response to deliver a personalised performance.

**Benny Har-Even** admires the science



These aren't your usual over-ear headphones...

**WHILE MANY OF** us tend to form a personal relationship with our kit after we've used it for some time, these innovative headphones from Nuraphone look to do so right from very first use. Their unique feature is that they offer a sound that's completely personalised to the individual listener. For your ears only, as it were – Q would be impressed.

While the Nuraphones look like regular

over-the-ear headphones, the magic is inside earbuds inside the earcups. Place the headphones on your head, with the earbuds burrowed into your lug-holes, run the Nuraphone app via Bluetooth, and microphones measure tones reflected by the

cochlea (inner ear). In conjunction with some clever calculations, these are used to create a sonic map of your ears. The output of the Nuraphones is then adjusted to match.

The profile takes minutes to create and you can have three profiles per device. I tested extensively against my son's profile and most of the time we preferred our own.

The headphones are light but sturdily built and the padded headband and soft silicon pads prove comfortable. However, the earbuds did make their presence felt, meaning long-term listening became something of a problem. Personal experience here may vary.

## Baby steps

Does this futuristic approach to personal listening actually work? The answer is 'yes'. As Baby walks the streets in the opening sequence of *Baby Driver* (Blu-ray) with Bob & Earl's *Harlem Shuffle* on his headphones, Edgar Wright's sprightly direction echoes every musical phrase with a visual cue and the

## SPECIFICATIONS

**DRIVERS:** Unspecified **DESIGN:** Over-the-ear/in ear **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** N/A **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** N/A **ACTIVE NOISE CANCELLING:** No **BLUETOOTH:** Yes. aptX; aptX HD **IN-LINE CONTROL:** Yes. Via cable supplied separately **WEIGHT:** 329g

**FEATURES:** Lithium-ion battery (20 hours claimed); external microphone for phone calls; USB-A charging cable provided; aluminium earcups; touch buttons (Bluetooth mode only); carry case provided; iOS/Android app

Nuraphones are the perfect partner for this. The sound is clean and fulsome, and there is so much energy to the rhythm and the horn blasts that I wanted to get up and do a little shuffle myself. There is plenty of detail, too, enabling you to lose yourself in the atmosphere of the scene, even with the Atmos mix being folded down into stereo.

As the film moves into the next track, *Egyptian Reggae*, plucked strings sound rounded and forceful. Dialogue is clear and weighty, making listening effortless.

To compare, I switched to my reference B&W Wireless P7s – and the Nuraphones had the edge. A case in point is when Baby orders a coffee; on the Nuraphones the sounds of the barista's machine in the background was distinctive, while on the B&Ws it was buried deeper in the mix. For music, the sound is balanced, with outstanding separation of instruments and good timing. Listen without your profile, though, and it loses its panache considerably.

These don't have active noise cancelling, but do create a decent sense of isolation. The sides of the earcups act as Play/Pause controls and activate a so-called 'Immersion mode', which essentially provides a bass boost that can be tailored to your liking via a slider on the app.

As wireless cans, they offer an aptX Bluetooth connection. AAC is also an option for Apple iPhone users. A 1.2m wired cable is available, but as a £15 accessory.

## Trick and treat

The unusual sensation of the earbuds takes the shine off these a little, but the trick tech works well and in sonic terms (post-profiling) the Nuraphones are among the best I've ever heard at this price. Worthy of your consideration ■

## HCC VERDICT



### Nuraphone

→ £350 → [www.nuraphone.com](http://www.nuraphone.com)

**WE SAY:** Not the comfiest of cans and you'll likely pay extra for additional cable options, but these impress with music and movie content.

## AV INFO

### PRODUCT:

Over-ear/in-ear hybrid cans with 'profiling' function

### POSITION:

Nuraphone's debut product

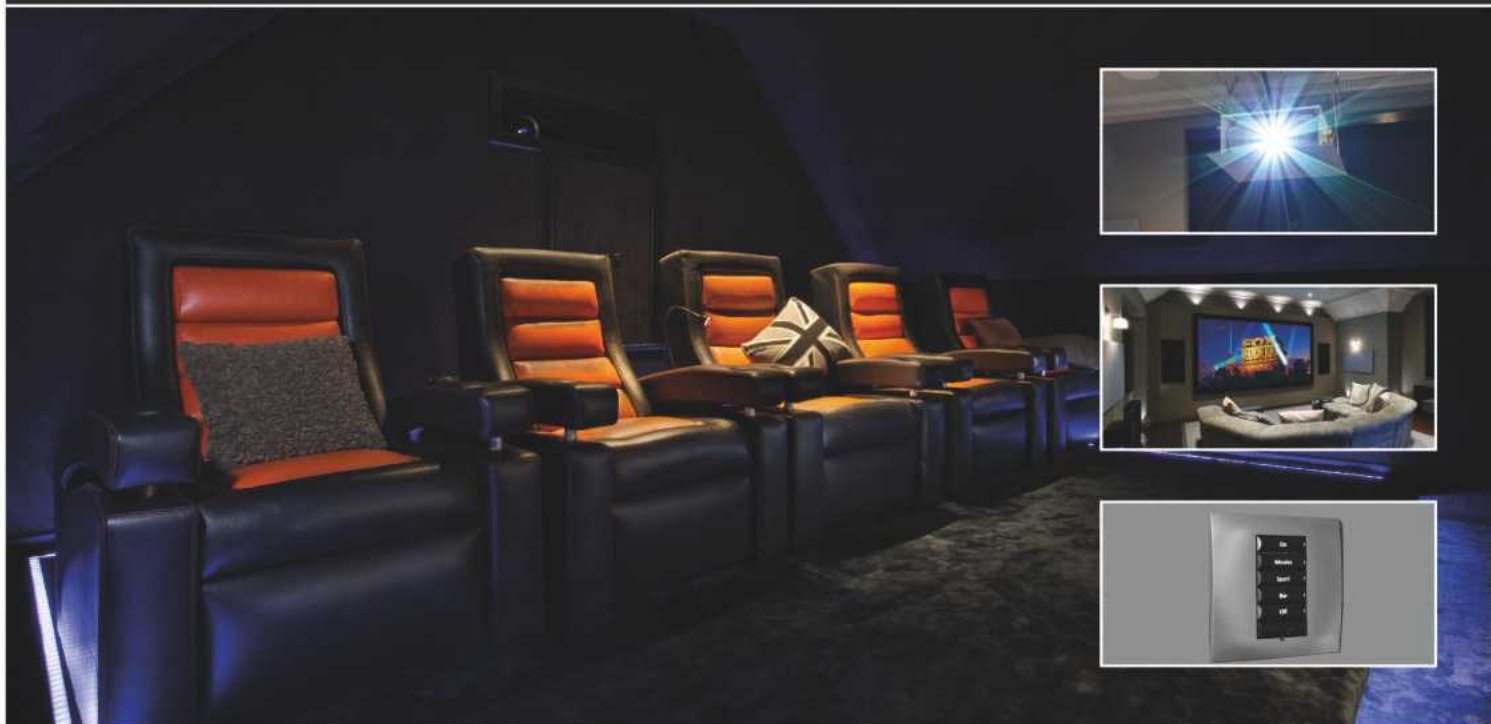
### PEERS:

Bose QuietComfort 35 II; Sony WH-1000XM2



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# WIN! A Roku Streaming Stick+

**FIVE  
UP FOR  
GRABS**

**THIS ISSUE WE'VE** teamed up with streaming media player maestro Roku to give five lucky readers a Streaming Stick+. To be in with a chance of winning one just answer the question below correctly.

## HDR you ready?

The Streaming Stick+ (£70) is the latest addition to Roku's range, introducing 4K and HDR playback to the video-on-demand party.

Roku's hardware has a well-earned reputation for ease-of-use, and the Streaming Stick+ is no exception. Simply plug it directly into your TV or projector's HDMI input, hook it up to a USB port for power, and you're ready to, er, Roku. Control is via the

**For info on Roku's range of streamers and on-demand channels, head to [www.roku.com/en-gb](http://www.roku.com/en-gb)**

supplied remote (which now integrates voice control for slick content searching) or Roku's smart device app.

An uncluttered and customisable user interface gives you access to Roku's extensive library of channels. Here you'll find your usual favourites – Netflix, Amazon Video, YouTube, Google Play, BBC iPlayer, ITV Hub, All 4, Demand 5 – and plenty more besides, from CuriosityStream's 4K documentaries to the Shudder horror flick channel and curated cinema service Mubi.

Perfect for smartening up your AV system, Roku's Streaming Stick+ is a class act. Awarded Best Buy status in *HCC* #282, it delivers a strong streaming performance, with 4K HDR10 visuals looking particularly sharp and vivid. A Wi-Fi boosting antenna, built into its power cable, helps deliver a stable connection ■

## Be in with a chance of winning one of five Roku Streaming Stick+s by answering the following film-related question:

**Q: Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson starred in which movie based on a videogame?**

**A) ALONE IN THE DARK B) DOOM C) WARCRAFT**

**HOW TO ENTER:** Simply email your answer (either A, B or C) to [competitions@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:competitions@homecinemachoice.com) with the subject line 'Roku'. You must include your name, address and contact telephone number.

**THE CLOSING DATE** for this competition is June 21, 2018. Please read the terms and conditions (opposite) before sending in your entry.

### Competition rules

**1.** The first entries drawn at random will win the prizes. **2.** Only one entry per person/household; multiple entries will be discarded. **3.** Entrants from the UK only. **4.** Employees of MyTimeMedia Ltd and companies supplying competition prizes are not eligible to enter this competition. **5.** Please ensure your personal details are correct, as they will be used to contact you if you win. **6.** No alternatives, cash or otherwise, will be offered to the winner as prizes. **7.** The editor's decision is final. **8.** Comp winners' info available upon request. **9.** The closing date for entries is June 21, 2018.



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**LONG-TERM TEST**

# Denon

## AVR-X7200WA

**TIME ON TEST:** Three years **REVIEWER:** Steve Withers

**WHEN DENON FIRST** launched the AVR-X7200WA all the way back in March 2015, it committed to keeping its flagship 9.2-channel AV receiver up-to-date for at least the next two years. I'll admit to being somewhat sceptical at the time, especially as these days most AV products seem to be obsolete within a matter of months. Yet I've been using an X7200 since its launch, giving me first-hand experience of Denon's upgrade path and making this an extremely long-term test. So three years down the line, has Denon delivered on its promise and should you consider buying the receiver at its current price of £1,500?

### What's good about it?

I may have taken Denon's ambitious update plans with a pinch of salt when I first unboxed the X7200 in 2015, but there were no such concerns when I heard the receiver in action. It blew me away with its impressive combination of

sheer power and superior processing. This is an AV receiver aimed at the cinephile, with a big soundstage, precise steering of effects and plenty of headroom. It's also built like the proverbial tank, which is not only psychologically satisfying but means it has withstood near daily use without any adverse effects. And after numerous firmware updates it remains absolutely rock-solid.

I've used the Denon with various speaker packages, some presenting quite challenging loads, and it has taken them all in its stride. I've also compared the X7200 to numerous other AVRs and often returned to it with a sense of relief.

When I initially set it up, I opted for a 5.1.4 speaker config that included a single subwoofer and four speakers on the ceiling. This layout utilised the nine channels of built-in amplification, and it's a testament to the X7200's inherent power (rated at 150W per channel) that it could effortlessly drive them all simultaneously. I subsequently added a second woofer to take advantage of the Denon's ability to run two discrete subs, plus rear speakers and extra amplification so I could switch to a 7.2.4 layout.

### AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
Nine-channel  
networked AVR

**POSITION:**  
Once Denon's  
flagship, now ousted  
by the AVC-X8500H

**PEERS:**  
Yamaha RX-A3070;  
Denon AVR-X6400H



At launch the X7200 was limited to Dolby Atmos, although it did an excellent job processing that particular object-based audio format. Since then Denon has added a free update for DTS:X and the option to purchase an Auro-3D upgrade as well. I downloaded the DTS:X update as soon as it was available and, in a moment of foolish optimism, also bought the Auro-3D upgrade.

## 'Denon's X7200 offers every feature expected of a modern AV receiver and plenty more besides'

Implementing a second speaker layout for the latter was somewhat challenging and ultimately rather pointless given the paucity of content.

All these different formats and configurations had the potential to be confusing but thanks to an intuitive menu system, and the inclusion of Audyssey MultEQ XT32 Pro, setup was fairly straightforward. Audyssey proved quite effective at equalising tonal imbalances between my different speakers, while correcting the bass response in my room. The X7200 is also very easy to operate generally, with a useful onscreen display and a well-designed remote control with a motion-sensitive backlight. The latter is handy in the dark, even if it does sometimes light up by itself during more LFE-heavy moments.

The X7200W (without the 'A' suffix) had eight HDMI inputs and three outputs when it first shipped, but these were all HDMI v1.4. That meant no 4K at 50/60p, no HDCP 2.2 copy protection and no HDR support. As soon as the necessary chipsets were available, Denon addressed this deficiency by releasing the updated X7200WA with HDMI 2.0 connectivity. If you already owned the X7200W, you could upgrade to HDMI 2.0 for a fee.

More recently, further firmware tweekery has added support for HLG and Dolby Vision passthrough.

## What's not so good about it?

It's hard to find fault with a receiver this accomplished, so it's less a question of what's not so good and more a question of what's missing...

As mentioned, the X7200 only has nine channels built in, so for a 7.x.4 setup you need to add a two-channel power amp. That's hardly the end of the world but if you want eleven channels from a single box, then this model

## SPECIFICATIONS

**DOLBY ATMOS:** Yes **DTS:X:** Yes **THX:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** Yes, 7.1 **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** Yes, 11.2 **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 9 x 150W (into 8 Ohms) **MULTIROOM:** Yes, 3 zones **AV INPUTS:** 5 x composite; 5 x digital audio (2 x optical; 2 x coaxial; 1 x Denon Link HD) **HDMI:** 8 x inputs; 3 x outputs (v2.0 with HDCP 2.2) **VIDEO UPSCALING:** Yes, To 3,840 x 2,160 **COMPONENT VIDEO:** 3 x inputs; 1 x output **DIMENSIONS:** 434(w) x 437(d) x 195(h)mm **WEIGHT:** 17.1 kg

**FEATURES:** Integrated Bluetooth and Wi-Fi; twin subwoofer output; Apple OS and Android control apps; iOS wireless sharing; Audyssey MultEQ XT32 Pro Room EQ with LFC; audio file playback including FLAC and DSD; Ethernet; 2 x USB; Apple AirPlay; 12V trigger, AM/FM tuner; Spotify Connect; HDMI passthrough in standby; Auro-3D optional firmware upgrade available; HDR passthrough incl. Dolby Vision

obviously isn't for you. If you do opt to add extra channels, I recommend getting a good stereo amp to drive the front L/R speakers, and let the X7200 run everything else.

In terms of missing features, this receiver doesn't support Denon's new remote app but I prefer the older version, so that's no great loss. The X7200 also doesn't support Denon's HEOS multiroom system, and this isn't something you can just add with a firmware update. How important this is will depend on whether you have an existing HEOS system or plan to set one up.

Audyssey could be considered one of the X7200's few real weaknesses. Compared to Dirac Live (as found on AVRs from Arcam and NAD), Audyssey seems rather dated and lacks the former's processing power and flexibility, but, conversely, it's considerably cheaper.

## Should I buy it?

If my experience is anything to go by, the answer is a resounding yes. The X7200 has been a joy to use and still holds its own after three years. Denon's success in keeping it up-to-date is reflected in the fact that I have absolutely no desire to replace it. Dirac-capable models are tempting, but there's a significant financial outlay attached to such a swap. Ultimately, the X7200 has served me well, offering every feature expected of a modern AVR and plenty more besides, so whatever's missing just isn't that important ■

1. Auro-3D can be added to Atmos and DTS:X support via a paid upgrade

2. The AVR shows its age with its inclusion of twin component video outputs

## HCC VERDICT



### Denon AVR-X7200WA

→ £1,500 → [www.denon.co.uk](http://www.denon.co.uk)

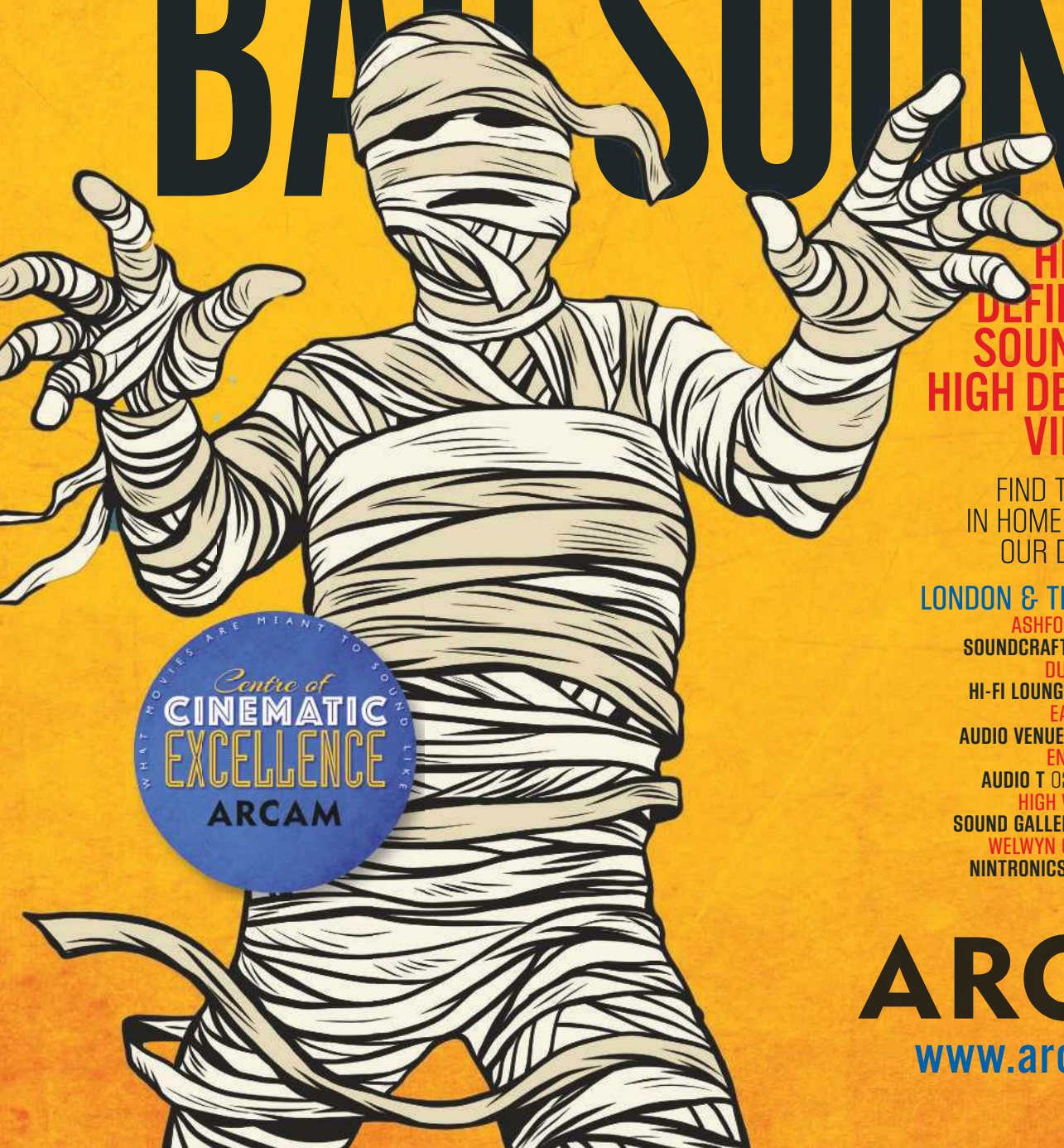
**WE SAY:** Denon has been true to its word, and three years after its initial release the X7200 remains up-to-date and a real AV bargain. But you might want more channels...

2





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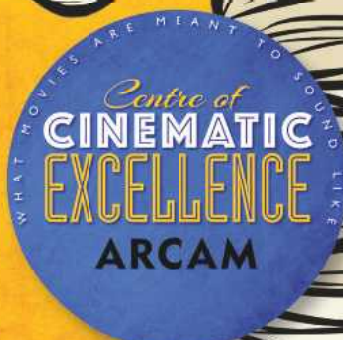
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# Digital Copy

An all-new home cinema setup is the ultimate fantasy, but in the real world, says **Mark Craven**, it usually makes sense to tackle things one step at a time

**HOW DO YOU** approach your AV system when it comes to updating it? Do you tackle it one bit at a time, or build up a substantial kitty to complete a total overhaul?

At the launch event for Q Acoustics' new 3000i range, brand director Alex Munro explained his company's thinking when it came to the loudspeakers. Rather than overseeing wholesale changes, an improved performance has been sought via 'multiple incremental gains' – in this instance, largely around cabinet design.

Such an approach is fairly common in passive loudspeakers. We often read of 'revisions' to driver design and 'updates' to crossovers. Speaker brands retain the same ranges through decades, fettling here, tweaking there.

The R&D teams responsible are lucky, though. They don't have to battle against the introduction of new formats, something that surely gives TV and projector manufacturers sleepless nights and ensures plenty of trips back to the drawing board.

**This is a real thorn in the side of home cinema at the moment** and what is clearly leading to the ends of tethers being reached, judging from input from *HCC* readers. How long does a home cinema display last these days before it can be considered, if not obsolete, but out-of-date? A couple of years, perhaps? Those who seek the highest quality may argue it's even sooner.

It's an AV fantasy to eradicate an entire system and replace it all with gleaming new toys (a fantasy we indulge in our System Selector feature, p20), but 'multiple incremental gains' is a term that's definitely more applicable to how many of us manage our movie-watching setups.

Our AV-Holic this issue, Gerard, is an example – two KEF R50 Atmos models recently added to his existing 7.1 speaker array to cap off his soundfield. This update didn't necessitate investing in a new AVR or replacing all his speakers (and I'm impressed by how neatly the R50s blend in with his Monitor Audio cabinets), but will have made a noticeable improvement to his system. And by gradual updates, you can get a greater appreciation of the impact a new addition can make – swap an AV receiver and a speaker package at the same time and you'll get a new sound to savour, but won't always have a clear idea of where that sonic signature comes from.

## Opportunity for others

An additional thought this month on the imminent closure of Oppo Digital. I'd like to say this is something I saw coming, but I absolutely didn't, as it's my understanding that it hasn't been an unprofitable business. It just appears that greater profits (through Oppo's smartphone division) have been prioritised.

Oppo's disc players in particular will be fondly remembered, and owners will hope that they aren't left lagging behind by intermittent firmware. But what I will really miss is the design and build. Both the current Oppo UDP models, full-width and pleasingly heavy, feel like you could drop them from a skyscraper and they'd simply dust themselves off and carry on playing.

This is something that other makers of 4K spinners, a few companies excepted, seem to have given up on, presumably to hit specific price points. But I'm still convinced there's space in the market for grown-up Blu-ray players. Here's hoping it gets filled ■

*How often do you add something new to your AV setup?  
Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)*

The next incremental gain that **Mark Craven** has an eye on is a new sofa. And he won't have to worry about it becoming obsolete





# Film Fanatic

**Anton van Beek** loves some explosive bombast in his movie soundtracks, but a visit to the multiplex reminds him that there's a lot to be said for silence, too...

**WHEN IT COMES** to movie soundtracks, it's often assumed that home cinema fans like them as loud and brash as they can be. After all, unlike friends and family members who are content listening to films through the piddly drivers crammed into their flatscreen TVs, we've actually gone to the effort of filling our living room or movie den with honking great speakers. So it only stands to reason that we'll be cranking them to the max. Doesn't it?

Well, it's true that there's nothing wrong with a spot of aural extravagance. I certainly watch movies on my home cinema setup with the volume higher than it is when I watch the vast majority of TV programmes. I don't believe there's anything to be gained from having George Alagiah bellowing today's news headlines at me, but I'm not going to watch, say, *Blade II*'s big showdown between Wesley Snipes, Ron Perlman and an army of faceless goons set to The Crystal Method's *Name of the Game* without ensuring that every single punch and blow on the Blu-ray's bass-rich DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 soundtrack hits with the maximum impact.

But it's not just about volume; there's also the matter of nuance. After all, a wall of noise is just that: noise. You might as well be listening to a 2.1-channel mix if all you really care about is the volume level. **Without nuance and range you end up with a soundtrack that is quite simply monotonous.**

This is why the very best multichannel mixes, those where care and attention has been lavished, focus as much (if not more) effort on creating discernible three-dimensional soundscapes through seamless steering and subtle atmospheric effects. Such soundtracks make you feel like you're in the heart of the onscreen action.

I was made even more aware of this recently, during a visit to my local multiplex to catch John Krasinski's survival horror *A Quiet Place*. For those of you who haven't had the pleasure, the film stars Krasinski and his real-life spouse Emily Blunt as parents trying to keep their family alive in a world where the human population has been ravaged by sightless monsters that hunt by sound. The protagonists spend every waking hour trying not to make any loud noises, communicating with one another only through sign language.

## Silence is golden

I'm sure you'll agree, it's one hell of a nifty setup. And it's one that the film's supervising sound editors Erik Aadahl and Ethan Van der Ryn work wonders with. Living up to its title, *A Quiet Place* is a very quiet film – right down to a lack of bird or animal noise in its rural environs (presumably they've all been hunted and killed, too).

Because of this, it actively draws attention to every single noise that emerges from the speakers, making its audience hyper-aware of the threat that each and every one could represent. It also serves to make those moments when the creatures attack, where the speakers erupt with all sorts of aural fury, that much more startling and impactful.

Better yet, it also resulted in the quietest cinema audience I have ever experienced. Across the packed theatre, breath was held, popcorn was sucked and not a word was uttered during the entire running time – apart from a quick expletive accidentally blurted out during one of the creature attacks.

Could it be that the best way to make audiences shut-up is to make films quieter, not even louder? ■

*What are your favourite examples of movie sound design? Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)*

**Anton van Beek** can't wait to own *A Quiet Place* on Blu-ray. We have a sneaky feeling his long-suffering neighbours will be quite happy too...





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# In The Mix

The closure of Oppo Digital has given the 'Blu-ray is dead' brigade more reason to cheer, but **Jon Thompson** says there's life in physical media yet

**I HAVE DECIDED** I am a neo-Luddite and I'm proud! What does that mean? It means I don't blindly adopt technology and assume that new technology is better just for the sake of it.

This ties into the announcement that Oppo has exited the Blu-ray market (see p9). The demise of its AV operation seems to have polarised people; many are saying its decision is a by-product of the death of physical media.

Now hang on. What death of physical media? Who starts these stupid rumours? Propaganda seems to be king and truth is lost in the noise of people with an agenda.

Digital downloads are receding as fast as they grew. Why? You don't own anything. Yes, streaming has increased rapidly, and it's about 50/50 with physical sales at the moment.

What has happened is indiscriminate sales have almost disappeared from the physical market. It's not worth the risk buying an unknown movie. If the film is bad you have wasted real money. If it's 'free' as part of a streaming package you might take a risk and watch it. Then, if people like it, they will want to keep it. The Netflix-distributed film *Annihilation* (pictured) is an example. This is now getting a massive physical media release months after being able to stream it for free.

Online services rotate their catalogues, so that often if you like a movie you might find it's no longer available the next time you want to watch it. If you own it on a disc, however, you can watch it whenever, and if you get bored of it you can always sell it or trade it in against another purchase. What streaming has done is stepped into the shoes left by the physical rental market.

Sales of 'things' have dropped off, and 'experiences' are the new boom area. As someone

who creates experiences for a living, I am well aware of this. But there's an elephant in the room...

## Hitting the buffers

The quality experienced when streaming video doesn't compare to physical media, which is another reason why people still buy discs. For me, streaming just never works. I have tried on so many different internet connections – even on a professionally managed 1TB connection – and it always pauses and stutters, and always at a key point that totally destroys the tension of the scene. Maybe it's just me, but I have never had this with a disc. You put it in the player, and it plays. If on the rare occasion you have a problem, you take the disc out, wipe it, and – ta-daah! – it works perfectly.

Those proclaiming the end of the physical media world need to check their facts. Library and specialist labels are doing better than ever. They know the market and know how many discs they will sell. Vinyl records are now selling better than they did in 1991, and that was a medium that was said to be dead and buried. **If you love watching movies and enjoy collecting them you'll always have some source**, and someone will always be making players. Just as I was recently taken aback by the sales of DCS's \$100,000 SACD player, another supposed dead format, Blu-ray and UHD Blu-ray will continue. Hopefully, we'll see Multiplexed Optical Data Storage (MODS-Disc) implemented to get BD storage up to 1TB per platter. If so then 8K on a disc will be straightforward.

A neo-Luddite I may be, but I'm confident physical media is alive and well, and will live on for years and years. Let's embrace it, and stop writing its obituary ■

*Is physical media dead in your AV system?  
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When he's not in his screening room, **Jon Thompson** tweets about Hollywood gossip, movie-making and digital mastering at @johnnyfocal





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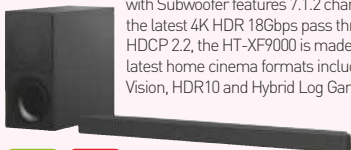
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# Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **Team HCC** is here to help

## What next for high-end Blu?

Hi. Last year you published my letter, where I discussed my most recent purchase – an 88in Samsung KS9800 TV, which, by the way, I have found to be fantastic. My final comment then was that I was waiting to buy a reference UHD player – e.g. an Oppo UDP-205.

Now I find that Oppo is shutting down its AV side – no more UHD/Blu-ray players. I therefore find it odd that in your latest issue (HCC #285) you make no mention of this, and on page 55 you suggested partnering the Denon AVC-X8500H with the UDP-205. I say this as Oppo has said it does not know how long it will keep the firmware updates going for. Therefore I cannot see any point in buying any Oppo products.

I am now going to wait for the new Panasonic reference-grade player and hope you will be reviewing it soon.

Brian Langford

**Mark Craven replies:** The simple reason there was no mention of Oppo Digital's announcement in our last issue is that this news wasn't released until after our magazine had gone to print. It then came during the



delay between our print date and our on-sale date, hence why you (and others) may have expected to read about it. We've covered it this issue on p9.

As for the question of firmware updates, Oppo has committed to maintaining after-sales support, and firmware, for... well, we don't know. This is annoying for Oppo owners, but I wouldn't expect the company to give a guaranteed 'end date' anyway.

Panasonic's DP-UB9000, which will support Dolby Vision and HDR10+, and audiophile features including a balanced XLR output, does look very enticing. Its release date hasn't been set in stone; we expect it to arrive before or around the Autumn,

## Coming this year: Panasonic's DP-UB9000 flagship

with a possible price tag of £1,000. A more direct equivalent of Oppo's UDP-205, however, may be the incoming mystery deck from Pioneer (see p16).

## Changeling Blu-ray? Yay!

It was sad to hear that Oppo will not be releasing any more of its excellent Blu-ray players.

I have the BDP-93, which I imported from the US, and which has given me many hours of pleasure with its outstanding picture and audio quality. I will one day upgrade to one of its UHD players, if there are any left to buy.

## More Star Wars please!

So I've picked up *The Last Jedi* on Ultra HD Blu-ray and been blown away. I'm now wondering when the rest of the *Star Wars* movies will appear on the format. Should we expect a trilogy boxset to appear when Episode IX is released? And what about the original trilogy?

Simon Hutton, via Facebook

**Anton van Beek replies:** There's been plenty of speculation about 4K releases for the *Star Wars* saga. My guess is that *Solo: A Star Wars Story* will be the next title given a UHD outing.

Disney will very likely revisit *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* on 4K BD (assuming it is impressed by sales figures of *The Last Jedi*). As for the original trilogy (and the following one), I believe the rights to these are still held by Twentieth Century Fox. All I know for certain is that no release has yet been announced.



Star Wars: Episode IV...: no 4K BD scheduled yet



On another note: after many letters to your magazine, *The Changeling* is finally coming to Blu-ray. Hurrah! And now for *The Forgotten* with Julianne Moore...  
Paul, Plymouth

**Anton van Beek replies:** Hi Paul. Yes, I remember you asking about *The Changeling* previously. And the good news is Second Sight has picked up this 1980 supernatural thriller for a BD release this June. It's a limited edition release, using a new restoration and boxed with a 40-page booklet. You might want to get your pre-order in now!

As for 2004's psychological chiller *The Forgotten*, while this is only available on DVD in the UK, a search online shows that it had an Australian Blu-ray release in March. As I explain over the page, such a disc would be Region B and would play on a UK Blu-ray player.

### Retailers have Pioneer spirit

I would like to say I totally agree with Mark Craven [*Digital Copy*, HCC #285] about shopping at physical retailers. I have recently purchased a Sony STR-DN1080 AV receiver and a UBP-X800 Blu-ray player from Sevenoaks Sound & Vision. In the past I have also bought a Denon DVD player, a Pioneer AVR, and Pioneer BDP-LX52 and LX55 Blu-ray players.

The BDP-LX52 is still going strong, but the LX55 proved nothing but trouble! The first one would not play Super Audio CDs without a lot of distortion. I returned it and was given a replacement. This had a habit of crashing and had to be unplugged to reboot. I took it back and was given a third one. My point is: you wouldn't get this level of service shopping online. Use it or lose it as the old saying goes!

John Ellison

**Mark Craven replies:** The Consumer Rights Act 2015 (or the Sale of Goods Act for items bought before then) protects us when we purchase items through online retailers, in the same way it does if we shop on the high street. But, as you've found, actually being able to speak to someone face to face makes the whole experience easier to deal with...

### The cost of importing

Hi – love the mag. I particularly love the AV-Holic feature. When we move house I am planning to do a proper cinema room – as it is, I have to make do with the spare room where I have a 5.2.2 setup, which will do for now!

Anyway, my question to you is that when you reviewed *Blade Runner 2049* [HCC #282] you mentioned there being a Dolby Atmos soundtrack on the region-free American Blu-ray. You suggested getting this release rather than the UK one but you omitted where

## ★ Star Letter...

### Game on for home cinema?

When I started reading *HCC* back at issue #1, the magazine helped me to do exactly what it said on the tin: build a system that let me watch movies at home to a decent standard, without the interruptions from screaming children and mobile phone morons that were progressively ruining the real cinema experience at the time. And as Steve May's *AV Avenger* column in HCC #285 makes clear, things have not improved there in the interim quarter-century, so no reason to go back.

My TV choices have always been pretty straightforward: emissive technologies calibrated for low-light situations – e.g. SD CRT, followed by Full HD plasma. So with a replacement due, my normal next step would simply be 4K OLED.

However, over the last few years, for an assortment of reasons (including ill-health and an aversion to comic book-based CGI destruction derbies), the majority of my screen time has shifted from evening movie and boxset watching to daytime console gaming, and the number of movies that make UHD BD attractive looks far lower than the number of games that will be 4K enhanced – and maybe last 50-100 hours versus a movie's two.

In terms of the HDR 'format war' I can't see games going beyond base HDR10 anytime soon. It's far more likely that the PlayStation 5 and 'NeXbox' will support VRR [variable refresh rates], which means waiting for HDMI 2.1 in 2019 might be the right call.

What about connectivity? Soundbar, set-top box and disc player is already three out of the typical four HDMI's before you even start on consoles. What about features annoyingly exclusive to one 'Smart' OS? Is Ambilight enough of an advantage for game presentation to make suffering Android worthwhile? Is anything?

So the criteria for 4K TVs for gaming first seem considerably different from those for viewing first. Where do you think the best compromise lies? OLED and close the curtains? Edge-lit LCD and save money? With 99 per cent of TVs now LCD, with the majority – and every monitor games are developed on – having edge-lit LED backlights, is there any incentive for designers to make them look their best on anything else?

It's almost impossible to do a decent A-B test as a consumer; most places that do demos haven't got the range, and warehouse stores that have the range don't

do demos, and use the overcranked Shop settings. (As for Mark Craven's question in HCC #285's *Digital Copy*, my iron rule is that if I take up a shop's time on a demo, I either buy from them at their price, or not at all, even if cheaper elsewhere).

More generally, with the games industry now bigger than Hollywood, and GTA V's gross of SIX BEEEEELION dollars and counting greater than any two Spielberg, Cameron or Bay films, should *HCC* be considering review sections dedicated to gaming use of screens, or even renaming itself *HEC* – *Home Entertainment Choice*?  
Dave Lockwood

**Mark Craven replies:** Ah, gaming. Always a tricky issue when it comes to home cinema.

I know that many of our readers never, ever do any gaming on their system, and probably consider the space given over each month in our *Playback* section to a single game review a waste of space. Others, of course, are different – we see readers' setups with stacks of consoles.

I use the habits of Team *HCC* as a bellwether. I play games a bit, but not often. Anton van Beek used to, but he's now on a mission to watch every 3D Blu-ray ever made instead. John Archer is practically obsessed with console gaming; Steve May isn't far behind. I don't think Richard Stevenson even knows how to hold a joypad.

It'd be easy to suggest that the best screen for gaming is simply the one with the fastest response time, but speed is only one part of the story. As you say, modern titles are making use of above-HD resolution and HDR; you want your display to be able to show these carefully crafted titles at their very best.

In fact, I'm not sure that the criteria for the best 'gaming' TV is actually much different to the best 'movie' TV. But if you have an eye on a next-gen console utilising HDMI 2.1, you certainly need to wait until next year before shopping around...

Star letter-writer Dave grabs crime drama *All the Money in the World* on Blu-ray, courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. Available now on Digital Download, Blu-ray™ and DVD, *All the Money in the World* is the new thriller from director Ridley Scott and stars Michelle Williams, Christopher Plummer and Mark Wahlberg in the gripping true story of the 1973 kidnapping of oil tycoon John Paul Getty's 16-year-old grandson.



to get it from! The only place I can find to buy it is on eBay for £35. Is there anywhere else I can get it cheaper? Many distributors aren't putting Dolby Atmos on Blu-rays anymore and instead are putting it on 4K discs. I can't afford to upgrade to a 4K projector and player at the moment.

Hope to have my cinema room in your magazine one day!

Nev Bussey

**Anton van Beek replies:** *Blade Runner 2049* was released on Blu-ray in the US by Warner Bros, but due to the way movies are distributed globally these days, ended up being a Sony Pictures release in the UK.

This wasn't the best outcome for AV-keen cinephiles, as Sony has a strange relationship with Dolby Atmos – reserving it for 4K discs, as you say – while Warner is more than happy to place Atmos tracks on its regular Blu-ray releases (but over the past couple of years has been holding them back from its 3D platters).

When it comes to importing discs from abroad it always helps to shop around and to check out other territories, too. Australia and Germany are just two other countries with sizable Blu-ray markets – and the fact that both fall within Region B coding makes the whole thing even easier (and often cheaper) than importing from the US.

Sadly, with Sony Pictures holding all the international rights to the film, it means those options simply aren't there when it comes to *Blade Runner 2049*. If you really want a Full HD Blu-ray with the Atmos soundtrack, then you're stuck with the US release.

Here at HCC we've used some eBay- and Amazon-based companies for importing

discs in the past, plus Wow HD ([www.wowhd.co.uk](http://www.wowhd.co.uk)). At the time of writing the latter has *Blade Runner 2049* listed for £29.08 (with free shipping).

This is still a lot more expensive than popping down to Sainsbury's and buying the UK Blu-ray, but at least it's a bit cheaper than the copy you spotted on eBay.

We often say 'you can import this disc' but if money is tight such a tactic is best reserved for when you feel it's the only (and absolutely necessary) option. There are often 4K Blu-rays released in the US in advance of the UK – obviously not all these are worth importing if you can hold on a few months.

As soon as you get your dream dedicated cinema room, send us some piccies!

## Should I save on my new TV?

**I am in the market for a new TV to replace my lovely but old Pioneer Kuro plasma.**

I do not use the TV for watching films anymore, only my projector. I hate sports and I do not play video games.

I even watch TV shows like *Game Of Thrones* on my projector as the production standard is so high. I am therefore wondering if I need an OLED display. I could save a ton of cash and just buy an LCD TV.

The screen I've shortlisted is Panasonic's TX-EX700 in 58in size. I think for day-to-day watching it would be fine. What do you think?

David Fox

**John Archer replies:** You don't mention what projector you currently use, David, but from what you have said I imagine saving 'a ton of cash' and replacing your Kuro with an LCD TV is a smart move.

It sounds like you hardly use your TV at all, and if you've grown accustomed to that, and don't mind firing up your PJ on a regular basis, why change? An OLED would make a fine replacement for your Kuro, but would be pricey for something that won't see much action.

We haven't reviewed the TX-58EX700 model, but did look at the step-up 65in EX750 last year. That model was – surprisingly – 3D-capable, but the EX700 isn't, although as you only plan to use it for broadcast TV that won't be an issue.

I've found the 58in EX700 available for around £650. This would save you potentially £2,000 (or more) on an OLED. Keep that cash and save it for when you want to upgrade your projector.

## Atmos speaker hunt

**Hi. I'm thinking of replacing my current speaker system with a full 7.2.4 Dolby Atmos speaker system.**

As I can't place any speakers in the ceiling and don't like the idea and aesthetics of add-on Atmos models that sit atop the other speakers, I was trying to find out more on speakers that include height drivers in their main cabinet.

The only ones I have been able to find are ELAC's Debut 5.2 system, the Klipsch R-26FA and RP-280FAs, and Pioneer's Elite SP-EBS73-LR & SP-EFS73 floorstanders.

Are there any more out there?

Steven Loyens, Belgium

**Mark Craven replies:** There are more out there, but not all are widely available and nor have we auditioned them yet.

Of the models you've mentioned, we reviewed the ELAC Debut system in HCC #262, but I must point out that this doesn't use integrated Dolby Atmos upfiring drivers in its main floorstanding speakers. Instead, ELAC makes separate speakers (the Debut A4s) that fit snugly on top – so snugly, in fact, that perhaps you thought they were built in.

Available for around £1,750, the Debut 5.1.2 array (using the F5 floorstanding models) is a great-sounding, great-value package.

ELAC has recently released a revised range, called Debut 2.0. Again, this features standalone Atmos modules.

We weren't quite as impressed by Pioneer's Atmos speakers (HCC #247), finding them a little lacking in energy and excitement, but these do integrate their Atmos drivers into their cabinets.

We also looked at Definitive Technology's BP9000 package [HCC #266]. This is slightly unusual, as the floorstanders feature active subwoofers. Atmos modules are separate, but lock into place and are fed by terminals at the base of the floorstander. In the UK these don't appear to still be on sale; I'm not sure about Belgium!



*Blade Runner 2049* has an Atmos track on its US Blu-ray





ELAC's Debut speakers – the Atmos modules are a style match

A similar concept (minus the in-built subwoofers) has been adopted by Jamo with its S 8 ATM upfiring speaker. This £200 model sits atop the company's S 809, S 807, and S 803 loudspeakers. Metal fasteners then connect the cabinets together, with the lower speaker housing binding posts for the Atmos unit. We'll be reviewing these in a multichannel system in a forthcoming issue.

A more recent integrated option is Focal's Sib Evo Dolby Atmos system (see p21) but this is a smallscale 5.1.2 sub/sat package and might not be what you had in mind – nor easily expanded to 7.2.4. We haven't auditioned the Klipsch tower speakers you mention, as these haven't been widely available on these shores. There are also integrated models from German brands Teufel and Nubert that you may have better luck auditioning in your country.

There's not the biggest choice, then, mainly because brands find it simpler to keep traditional floorstander speaker and Atmos designs separate, which enables them to

target a far greater number of buyers. A two-channel music enthusiast isn't going to look at a speaker with an Atmos driver, but will consider – for example – KEF's Q550. But the same speaker is a neat match for KEF's Q50a Atmos module.

For the widest choice possible for your 7.2.4 system, you might want to get over your aesthetic preferences!

### Give your plasma dynamism!

**After several years of sterling service our Panasonic TX-P42G20 plasma TV was looking increasingly lacklustre, especially compared with today's models. When it was new it delivered a great picture, using a choice of ISF calibration along with a THX preset. Naturally I ignored the Dynamic mode intended for the shop-floor shouting match.**

Fast forward a few years. I was flipping through the menu options and switched to Dynamic. Wow! What a difference! Much

brighter but with great contrast and natural colours. Certainly not HDR or 4K, but a dramatic improvement nevertheless. Perhaps the tendency of plasma TVs to fade over time explains why the Dynamic setting now works so well?

This set won't be our main TV since a new 4K model is pretty much inevitable. But the 'new' Panny's picture is so good that I decided to upgrade its audio with a Q Acoustic M2 soundbase. It occurs to me that some readers may also want to revisit their TV settings before deciding to give up on their trusty plasmas.

Ion ■

### Contact us...

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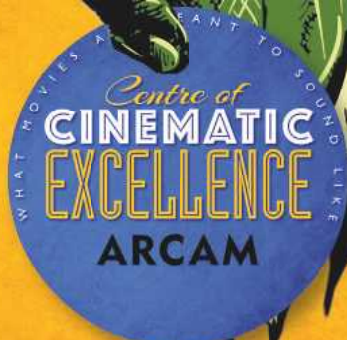
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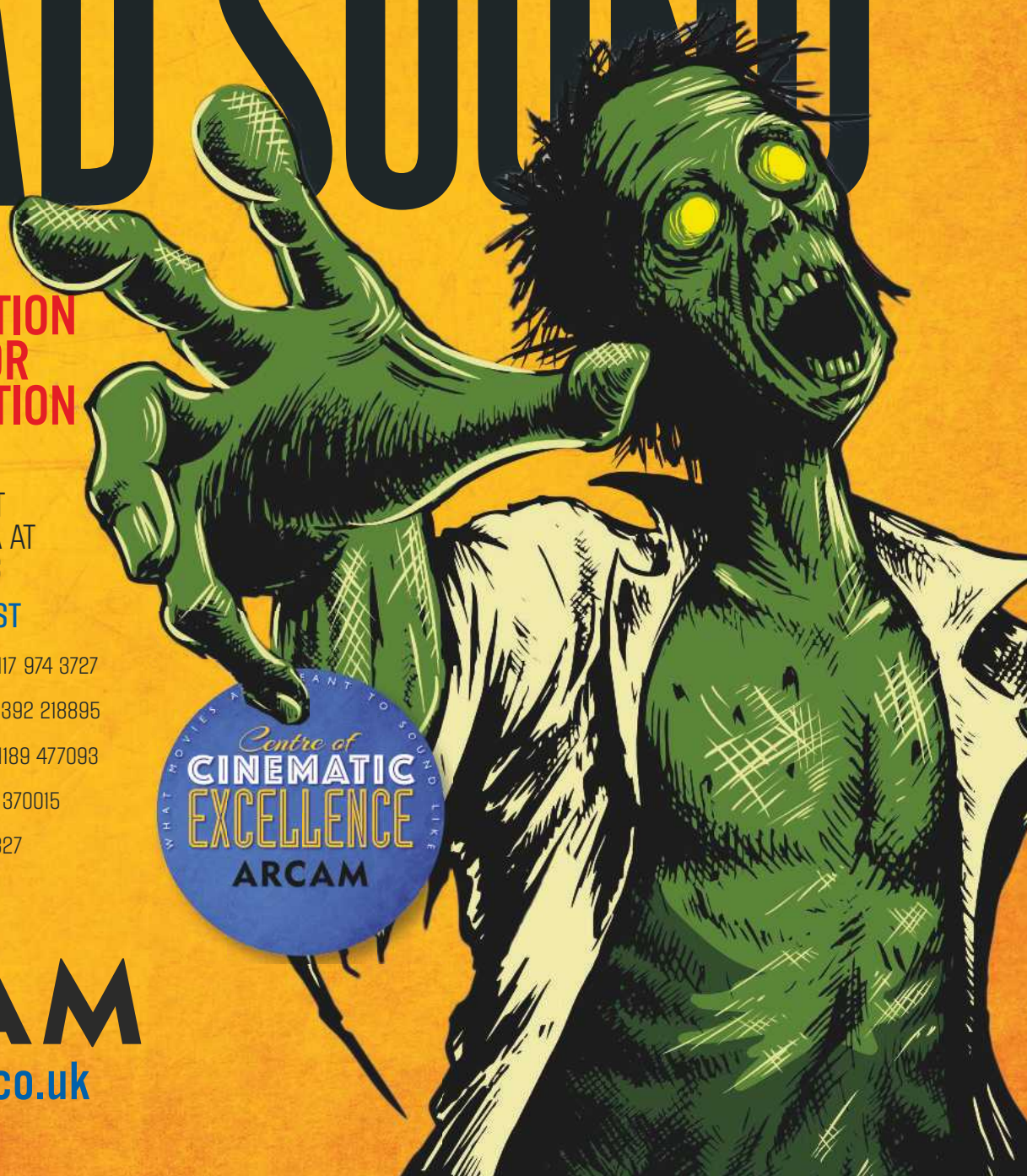
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### Indicator Blu-ray bundle!

To celebrate the release of the *Five Tall Tales: Budd Boetticher & Randolph Scott* at Columbia, 1957-1960 boxset on May 21, we've teamed up with Powerhouse Films to give away a bumper bundle of Indicator Blu-rays. As well as a copy of the boxset, one lucky winner will also get copies of *The Big Heat*, *The Wild One*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Housekeeping* and *Ghosts of Mars*, plus an Indicator tote bag!

### Question:

Which of the following is a real Budd Boetticher western?

### Answer:

A) *The Tall G* B) *The Tall P* C) *The Tall T*  
Email your answer with 'Five Tall Tales' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



### The Old Dark House

A group become trapped in a spooky Welsh mansion in this 1932 horror-comedy from director James Whale.

Available to own from May 21, Eureka Entertainment's Masters of Cinema Blu-ray boasts a new 4K restoration – and to celebrate we've five copies up for grabs!

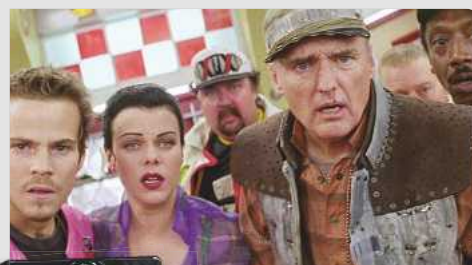
### Question:

Which of the following classic horror films was not directed by James Whale?

### Answer:

A) *Dracula* B) *Frankenstein*  
C) *The Invisible Man*

Email your answer with 'Old Dark House' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



### Space Truckers

Ever wanted to watch Dennis Hopper battle killer androids and a cyborg space pirate? Well now you can, courtesy of Second Sight's recent Blu-ray release of this cult

1990s sci-fi-comedy. If you fancy being in with the chance of winning one of five *Space Truckers* Blu-rays, just answer the following question correctly...

### Question:

Dennis Hopper played the villain in which notorious videogame adaptation?

### Answer:

A) *Street Fighter* B) *Super Mario Bros*  
C) *House of the Dead*

Email your answer with 'Space Truckers' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



### eXistenZ

David Cronenberg's mind-bending virtual reality thriller starring Jennifer Jason Leigh and Jude Law finally makes the leap onto Blu-ray on May 21 as one of the debut

titles for 101 Films' new Black Label imprint. To mark the release, we've got five copies of the limited edition, feature-packed *eXistenZ* Blu-ray to be won!

### Question:

David Cronenberg directed which of the following comic book adaptations?

### Answer:

A) *A History of Violence* B) *Road to Perdition*  
C) *Captain America: The First Avenger*

Email your answer with 'eXistenZ' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!

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# Certified: AV-Holic!

HCC reader **Gerard** has turned his garage into a private movie room with Dolby Atmos audio and largescreen projection. It's a long way from a VCR and a 28in TV...



A 7ft screen gives Gerard's cinema visual impact



## Welcome to the AV-Holics Hall of Fame – introduce yourself!

My name is Gerard. I am 60 years old and live in Dublin.

### How long have you been into home cinema?

Since the time of the first Nordmende VCR in Ireland in the late 1970s. I was so ahead of the time that I could not find a VCR tape to play on it! I paired the Nordmende with the latest and greatest TV at the time. I think it was 28in...

My first 'large' TV was a 40in rear-projection model, which was followed by a second-hand three-tube projector.

### What's in your AV setup now?

I use an Epson EH-TW9300 projector (compatible with 4K and HDR sources) with a seven-foot Sapphire fixed-frame 16:9 ratio screen.

Sources are an Oppo BDP-95 Blu-ray player, a Humax satellite receiver, a 16TB



The latest addition is a pair of KEF R50 Atmos speakers





The Epson EH-TW9300 projector supports 4K HDR playback

QNAP NAS for storage of movies, and an Nvidia Shield box, which is especially good for streaming 4K HDR content.

My speaker system uses Monitor Audio Silver models (including subwoofer) in a 7.1 package, with two KEF R50 Dolby Atmos modules placed on top of the front left/right MA Silver cabinets – so a 7.1.2 configuration. Driving this setup is a nine-channel Yamaha RX-A3050 DTS:X/Atmos receiver.

The whole system is controlled with Amazon Alexa, through an Echo speaker and Logitech Harmony hub.

### Whereabouts in your house is the cinema room?

It's in my converted garage. The space measures approximately 20 feet long and 10 feet wide.

### Did you get any help from professionals when fitting out your system?

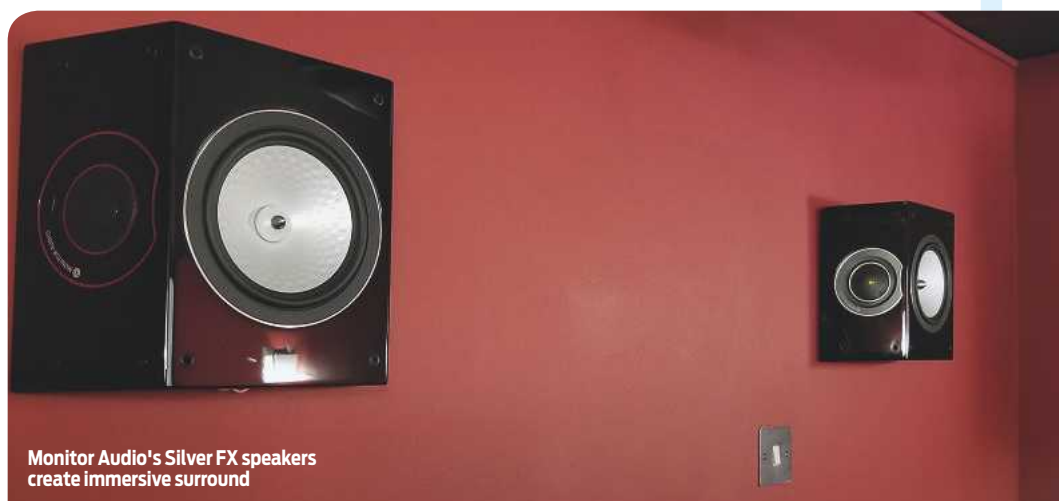
I got a friend of mine to do the plastering and decorating. I did all the electrical and technical setup.

### What was the last thing you added to your system?

The two KEF R50 upfiring speakers, which I got very recently. They really add something extra. When playing a movie in Dolby Atmos I can really feel the sound effects from above.

### Are you thinking of upgrading anything else?

I would like to add another pair of Atmos speakers – these would really complete my sound setup!



Monitor Audio's Silver FX speakers create immersive surround



The room provides dedicated seating for four

## What's your favourite bit of kit and why?

That would be my Yamaha RX-A3050 receiver. Many years ago when I bought my first AVR it was a Yamaha, and I have had a few other brands over the years, but somehow I was never really happy with the sound on both movies and music.

This is an awesome product: it has a lovely sound and I enjoy listening to my music on it. It's also a top performer for movie playback. It delivers powerful effects and creates a wonderful experience.

## What movies/discs do you use to show off your system?

*Saving Private Ryan, Jurassic Park, The Matrix and Moulin Rouge.*

## And what are your Top 5 favourite flicks?

*Backdraft, Apollo 13, Star Wars: The Force Awakens, John Wick and Mad Max: Fury Road.*

## Do you stream movies/TV from Netflix/Amazon/Sky etc?

Yes, I have a Netflix subscription.

## How often do you settle down for movie night?

I use the cinema room around two to three times a week to catch up on my TV shows, such as *Vikings*, *The Walking Dead* and *The X-Files*. We also use the room for big sporting events, and every Saturday we have a family movie night.

## And what do your friends and family think of the cinema room?

The initial reaction is always 'Wow!'. They are all fascinated by the cinema and love to visit for a movie.

The little ones love watching cartoons, the teenagers love the size of the screen and the sound. The adults just love the whole experience! ■

Gerard rates his Yamaha AVR as 'an awesome product'



## Share your cinema system in the mag!

If you want to be in **HCC**, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. Here are a few tips...

1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing – we will make them print-ready.
2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we can print them.
3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch

- movies in the dark, our cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.
4. Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.

5. Don't be shy. Send a picture of yourself!
6. Show us more. Got pictures of your room before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

### Now what?

Email your images to **letters@homecinemachoice.com** with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and provide your answers to the questions above – then we'll be in touch!





# Stars of the Silver screen

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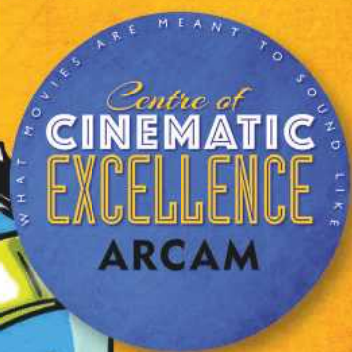
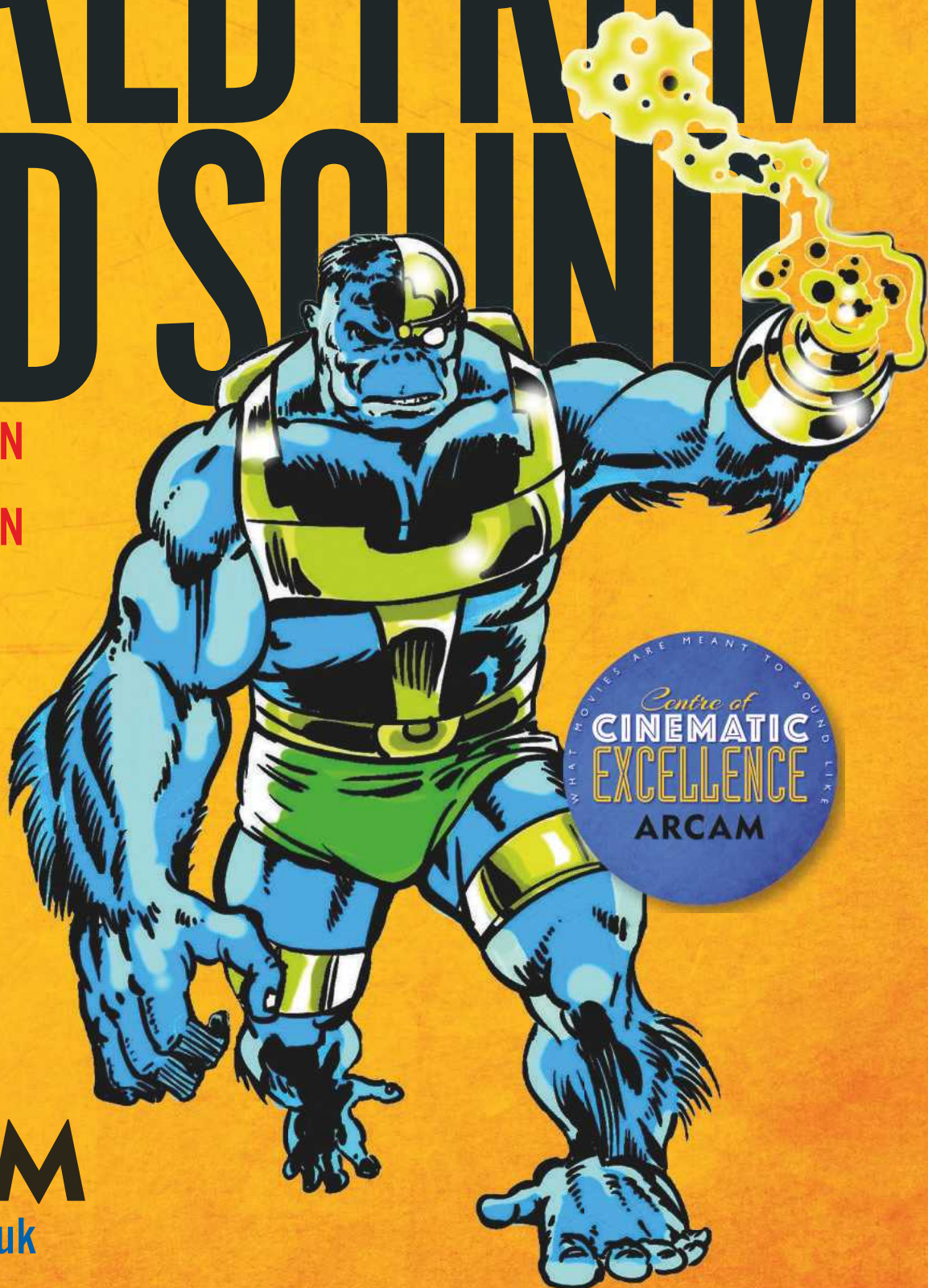
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# PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **THE GREATEST SHOWMAN** Making a song and dance of 4K **THE COMMUTER** There's trouble on the tracks for Liam Neeson **ALL THE MONEY IN THE WORLD** Should you Getty this true crime thriller on BD? **THE LAST JEDI** Divisive sequel receives a crowd-pleasing 3D transfer **EXISTENZ** Playing games with Cronenberg **& MORE!**

## Lost and found

Lost in Space: Season One → Netflix Original

'Danger, Will Robinson!' Netflix has rebooted the cult 1960s sci-fi series *Lost in Space* for a new audience. Find out if it's worth streaming in 4K on your AV setup (and if it's any better than the 1998 Matt LeBlanc movie) as we give the new VOD series a look on p106.

### HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

Liam Neeson really wasn't a fan of National Hugging Day...



# Neeson takes us on a wild ride

He may have downsized from a plane to a train, but the action is still satisfyingly larger-than-life



## → THE COMMUTER

Life is simple for insurance salesman Michael MacCauley (Liam Neeson). Every morning he says goodbye to his wife and son, and catches the train into New York City where he works, and every night he commutes home the same way.

That all changes one evening when Michael is approached by a mysterious woman (Vera Farmiga) who poses a question: would he be willing to identify a passenger on the train 'who doesn't belong' and plant a GPS tracker on them in exchange for a big pile of much-needed cash.

Before you can say 'a very particular set of skills', Michael is caught up in a deadly conspiracy. But it seems that the villains hadn't banked on Michael being a former cop (or watched any previous Liam Neeson movies). It isn't long before he's running up and down the train, punching people and doing all he can to mess with their carefully laid plans.

This fourth collaboration between Neeson and director Jaume Collet-Serra follows closely in the footsteps of their 2014 airborne thriller *Non-Stop*, by trapping the action star in a confined mode of public transport and having him race against the clock to solve a deadly mystery. And just like that earlier film, *The Commuter's* story is driven entirely by outlandish plot twists and coincidences.

But as before, none of this really matters. The reason that we watch these films is to be taken on a wild 90-minute ride of action and suspense; Walter Hill meets Alfred Hitchcock, if you will.

And its cheering stuff. For every plot hole, there's a scene where Liam Neeson beats somebody up with a guitar, or gives the finger to a former Goldman Sachs employee.

Sometimes we're all in the mood for undemanding B movie thrills – and *The Commuter* proves yet again that nobody delivers them quite as well as Neeson and Collet-Serra.

**Picture:** *The Commuter* pulls up on Blu-ray with a strong AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode. The clarity and sharpness of the imagery ensures that the confined interiors of the train hold just as much detail as the early sun-lit exteriors. Colours aren't particularly vivid, with the palette inside the carriages favouring metallic greys and blues, but bursts of bolder colours (like the explosion in Chapter 9) are extremely well saturated. Only several soft-looking CG visual effects sequences hold it back from perfection.

**Audio:** The Atmos soundtrack is a good complement to the film's onscreen action. Whether it's something as simple as the subtle ambience of a moving train, or more dynamic fare like an explosive derailment (Chapter 9), the mix never falters.

It also features plenty of use of the overhead layer. The sound of the train moves above you as Neeson's character hides below it (Chapter 7) and a careening carriage flies through the air and eventually crashes down behind you (Chapter 9, again).

**Extras:** All you get are a four-minute interview with Neeson, talking about his working relationship with Collet-Serra, plus a so-called *Making of...* that clocks in at under two minutes! In a word: terrible.

## HCC VERDICT

### The Commuter

→ StudioCanal → Region B BD  
→ £23

**WE SAY:** In AV terms this BD kicks as much ass as the film's leading man. Extras are another story...

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★



## The Post

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD  
£25



Recounting the story behind *The Washington Post's* publication of the Pentagon Papers, Steven Spielberg's

historical drama starring Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks can't help but find itself rubbing shoulders with Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men*. Unfortunately, it's a comparison that does Spielberg's film no favours; *The Post* is a curiously inert piece of cinema. It does at least look and sound magnificent on Blu-ray – the DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix doing a fantastic job of re-creating the buzz of the busy newsroom. Extras take the form of four informative *Making of...* featurettes.



## Molly's Game

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD  
£25



The directorial debut of acclaimed screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, *Molly's Game* is based on the true story of former

Olympic hopeful skier Molly Bloom (Jessica Chastain), whose reinvention as the queen of high-stakes poker games led to her being arrested by the FBI. As you might expect from Sorkin, this gripping film prioritises snappy dialogue over cinematic visuals, not that this causes any real problems with the BD's crisp 2.40:1 1080p encode. Frustratingly, while Sorkin recorded a commentary, it's an iTunes-exclusive, leaving this disc with a three-minute promo as its sole extra.



## Downsizing

Paramount → All-region BD  
£25



In an effort to save the Earth from overpopulation, scientists come up with a novel solution: irreversibly shrinking people to just four-inches tall. This is a fascinating premise with all

sorts of far-reaching social, political and economic implications, but writer-director Alexander Payne's film only briefly touches on so many of them in favour of using the setup as the backdrop for a mildly amusing comic romance/eco-fable. This Blu-ray's warm-toned, finely detailed 2.40:1 Full HD encode serves the digital photography very well, although a 4K platter is available in the US. Modest extras consist of six featurettes.



# The last great 3D BD release?

The latest *Star Wars* sequel sets a new benchmark for stereoscopic home cinema

## → STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI 3D

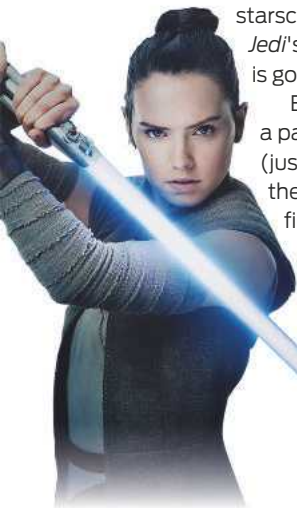
Writer-director Rian Johnson's *Star Wars* sequel may have divided the saga's fanbase, but here at HCC we remain united in the belief that *The Last Jedi* is precisely the shot in the arm the franchise needed after J.J. Abrams' more formulaic *The Force Awakens*.

Is it perfect? Not at all, with Finn's side-quest distracting from the main thrust of the narrative and turning out to have been mainly pointless beyond growing his character a tad. But that's a minor issue in a film as creative and spectacular as this; one that isn't afraid to shake up the status quo in some major – and especially effective – ways.

Will J.J. Abrams be even half as brave as Johnson in his storytelling decisions when he takes the reins of next year's follow-up? We'll have to wait and see.

**Picture:** From the moment the opening crawl starts to disappear into the seemingly infinite depths of a starscape, it becomes clear that *The Last Jedi's* 2.40:1-framed Full HD 3D encode is going to be very special indeed.

Every single object in the frame has a palpable sense of depth and volume (just look at the subtle contours in the close-up of Rey's face during her first lesson with Luke – Chapter 19). Colours remain perfectly saturated (check out the reds in Snoke's throne room – Chapter 8) and the sharpness of the image ensures that even the darkest sequences (such as Kylo



Ren's attack on Leia's ship – Chapter 12) are rendered with surprising clarity and a tactile sense of space.

While 3D highlights litter the film, there's one scene that merits a special mention. With its characters moving seamlessly back and forth through parallax planes and burning embers filling the air, the Praetorian Guard fight (Chapter 42, pictured above) is one of the most spectacular stereoscopic showcases we've seen in a long time.

**Audio:** Unlike the UHD Blu-ray (reviewed last issue), both the 3D and 2D 1080p discs feature a DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack. As with the 4K platter's Atmos audio, these tracks are mixed lower than you might expect, so you may need to tinker with your AVR setup to get the best out of them.

**Extras:** There are no extras on the 3D disc itself, but the full collection of bonuses (chat-track, doc, etc) can be found on the two discs accompanying it.



*The Last Jedi* succeeds in making you like Yoda again – no mean feat after his portrayal in Lucas's prequel trilogy...

## HCC VERDICT

### Star Wars: The Last Jedi 3D

→ Walt Disney → All-region BD  
→ £28

**WE SAY:** A seriously stunning presentation that gives 3D fans reason to cheer.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★

# Roll up! Roll up!



This Ultra HD outing for the hit musical delivers a showcase of HDR imagery and Atmos audio you'll return to again and again...

## → THE GREATEST SHOWMAN

On paper, an original musical based on the life of dodgy 19th Century circus master/self-publicist P. T. Barnum hardly sounds like a formula for movie success. Certainly nobody was that surprised when its opening box office takings were tepid at best.

But then something unexpected happened. People who took the time to see *The Greatest Showman* didn't just like it, they loved it. Word of mouth spread like wildfire, and before anyone knew what was happening the film was filling cinemas week after week on its way to a \$430m global box office take.

And you know what? It actually deserves its success. The story is simple but effective in its blend of romance, class wars, and overcoming prejudice. All the lead actors (especially Hugh Jackman) deliver energetic and engaging performances. There's spectacle galore in the film's show-based set-pieces. And then there are the songs.

Every track is a masterclass in 'theatrical' song-writing, combining





instantly catchy hooks with sing-a-long chants and a larger than life emotionality that suits the film's unashamedly earnest approach perfectly.

Ideally the film would run 10 minutes longer to better introduce the members of Barnum's 'Freak Show'. Even as it stands, though, *The Greatest Showman* is a beautifully crafted, passionate, energetic and immersive feel-good experience.

**Picture:** With its HDR10 master (there's no Dolby Vision), *The Greatest Showman*'s 4K Blu-ray does a sublime job of bringing the film's 2.40:1 spectacle into your living room.

For starters, the picture is stunningly detailed. The film was shot at a mixture of 3.4K and 6.5K resolutions and, mercifully, given a native 4K digital intermediate for its cinematic run. This 4K DI has evidently formed the basis of the 4K Blu-ray picture, and it's a thing of beauty. Its extreme clarity and dense textures provide a needed sense of depth and space for the movie's ever-busy images.

Its sense of three-dimensionality is enhanced by gorgeous HDR/wide colour work, which provides far more intensity and dynamism to the often theatrical, stylised lighting than you witness with the 1080p Blu-ray. Meanwhile, the encode's strong

brightness and colour highlights appear against a foundation of inky black colours.

The image's bold approach does not stop it from showcasing refinement with subtler details, such as skin tones and the film's varied costume design.

Put all this together and you've got some of the best-looking pictures – particularly during the circus performances and Buckingham Palace sequence – that 4K Blu-ray has given us so far. The HD Blu-ray, by comparison, looks dull. Plop it in your 4K spinner to see exactly what the UHD format gives you.

**Audio:** Given how important the original songs are to *The Greatest Showman*'s success, it's a joy to find this Ultra HD Blu-ray's Dolby Atmos soundtrack pumping them out with a winning combination of dynamism, clarity and multichannel imagination. Your cinema room morphs into a virtual circus tent (or perhaps more accurately, West End theatre), leaving you with no option but to get carried away by the soundtrack's infectious mood. It's bass-rich and opulent, with impressive fidelity and thoughtful effects placement.

Vocal tracks can sometimes sound artificially 'laid over' the rest of the mix, but that's a minor issue. I also found I had to slightly adjust the audio delay settings on my Blu-ray player to compensate for a marginal lip sync error.

**Extras:** Fox knows its audience when it comes to *The Greatest Showman*'s extra features. The 4K disc lets you watch the film normally but with the song lyrics on screen, or in a Music Box format that jumps directly to each song – again with the lyrics onscreen. So you can, you know, 'join in'.

This platter also boasts a serviceable commentary track by director Michael Gracey, although it's a pity he spends so much time praising everybody's work and explaining a story that doesn't need explaining.

The accompanying Blu-ray adds some short vignettes on each of *The Greatest Showman*'s songs. These include interviews with the songwriters and, in the case of *This Is Me*, some interesting footage of cast rehearsals, too.

A 15-minute *Making of...* overview, together with half-an-hour of more in-depth featurettes on everything from production design to costuming and choreography are all also worthy of your time. Even the Concept Art and Storyboard galleries are more spectacular than most.



Hugh Jackman reportedly read three dozen books about P.T. Barnum to prepare for the role

## HCC VERDICT

### *The Greatest Showman*

→ Twentieth Century Fox → UHD Blu-ray & Region B BD → £35

**WE SAY:** A stunning 4K transfer for one of the most surprising hits to come out of Hollywood in years.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★



## Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. **Rik Henderson** checks out a videogame vying for time on your home cinema system...



### God of War

Sony Interactive Entertainment → PS4 → £50

The original *God of War* games, for the PS2 and PS3, were superb for their time. The blend of arcade action and puzzling made great use of the hardware available and sated the thirst for button-mashing, boss-bashing that was popular back then. However, gaming has grown up. And so too has *God of War*.

Speedy sorties have been replaced with considered pacing and epic set-pieces. Even the simple, revenge-driven story of the original trilogy has been substituted with a heart-filled, emotional tale of redemption and growth. Lead protagonist Kratos has also grown. He has found a new home in the lands of Norse myth and is joined by a son, Atreus. It is their relationship and bonding that forms the bedrock of this adventure.

It starts simple enough. Kratos' wife – Atreus' mother – has passed and the two survivors must take her ashes to the peak of the highest mountain in the lands. But the journey is far from straightforward or safe and, sure enough, father and son are soon battling dark creatures and Norse gods across realms of folklore.

This *God of War* handles combat with true mastery. Whether you are fighting an enormous troll or one of the many undead Draugr, you feel like the game rewards your ever-increasing skill.

That's partly thanks to the Leviathan Axe Kratos wields, which returns back to your hand with a tangible thump, much like Thor's hammer, after a well-aimed throw. It is, possibly, the most satisfying weapon in gaming.

The same can be said of the puzzles, of which there are many, or the side missions that can be found on (mostly) open-world maps. There are many to seek out and are always worth the effort.

The game also looks epic. The PS4 Pro gets checkboard-upscaled 4K resolution with a fixed frame rate of 30fps. Or you can choose to have a 1080p version that has an unlocked frame rate that achieves almost a blanket 60fps instead. Either way, you get HDR – on standard PS4 too. And this is one of the best-looking games to have employed that technology to date.

*God of War* is a magnificent new chapter in the much-loved franchise and an instant entry onto the essential list.



## The Incredible Hulk [4K]

Universal Pictures → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £35



It may not be anyone's favourite Marvel movie (certainly not leading man Edward Norton's, judging from his rather public spat with the producers) but *The Incredible Hulk* is much

better than its reputation suggests and plays a key role in developing the larger world of the MCU. While the uptick in detail here is fairly negligible over the Blu-ray, this 4K HDR encode is a far more vibrant affair. And, unlike the Atmos mixes that have graced Disney's first couple of Marvel 4K releases, the DTS:X upgrade included is absolutely smashing.



## Space Truckers

Second Sight → Region B BD £20



An independent space haulier finds himself caught up with space pirates and an army of robotic killing machines in this tongue-in-cheek 1996 sci-fi flick from Stuart 'Re-Animator'

Gordon. A flop on its initial release, *Space Truckers* plays rather better today, possibly due to how much of its DNA has worked its way into the *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies. At the heart of this hi-def release is a pleasing 2K restoration (framed at 2.40:1) that works wonders for the gaudy palette. And while the film's action cries out for something a little more expansive, the disc's LPCM 2.0 track is a pretty lively affair.



## Grizzly

88 Films → Region B BD £16



A 15-foot prehistoric grizzly starts chowing down on the tourists in a National Park in this blatant *Jaws* rip-off from 1976. Of course, while it hits many of the same story beats as Spielberg's masterpiece, *Grizzly* falls far short matching it for acting or filmmaking craft – but when you have a giant bear sneaking up on people like an ursine Michael Myers, this isn't really an impediment to your enjoyment. This BD boasts a very grainy 2.35:1 encode that is prone to density fluctuations, plus a video looking back at the career of actor Christopher George.







# A plum role for Plummer

Powerful performances help paper over the notoriety surrounding Ridley Scott's thriller

## → ALL THE MONEY IN THE WORLD

Taking time out from dividing audiences and critics with his reinvention/ruination (delete as appropriate) of the *Alien* franchise, director Ridley Scott probably thought he was on much safer ground with a thriller based on the true story of the 1973 kidnapping of oil magnate John Paul Getty's grandson.

As we now know, it wasn't to be. Following the allegations of sexual assault being levelled at Kevin Spacey, who played Getty – and with only 47 days to go until the film was set to open at cinemas – Scott opted to recast the role with Christopher Plummer and reshoot every scene the character appears in. Remarkably, the octogenarian filmmaker managed to pull it all together and, for the most part, the joins are practically impossible to see.

Removed from these highly publicised issues, *All the Money in the World* turns out to be an enjoyable and gripping battle of wills between a mother who will do whatever it takes to get her son back and a venal man who values money over everything else, even his own family. As good as Plummer is in the latter role, the film would be nothing without Michelle Williams' vulnerable yet impassioned turn as his estranged daughter-in-law.

Of the principal cast, only Mark Wahlberg is out of place, with his ex-CIA agent character more suited to the sort of popcorn heroics that have no place here. As such, he comes off feeling superfluous to the story and every minute you spend with him is one less

that Scott's film could have spent focusing on its satirical exploration of the way that greed and wealth distort human relationships.

**Picture:** The sixth collaboration between Scott and cinematographer Dariusz Wolski, *All the Money in the World* arrives on Blu-ray with a very impressive AVC 2.40:1-framed 1080p encode. Employing a deliberately cold and muted aesthetic, the imagery makes sparing use of bold colours, but when they do appear the saturation is excellent. And while this cool grading does have a slight knock-on effect on shadow detail retained in some dark scenes, the overall clarity and sharpness of the transfer ensures that even low-lit locations are packed with well rendered textures.

Unless a 4K Blu-ray comes along (not even the US has had one to date), this Full HD presentation should be more than enough to satisfy anyone keen to add the film to their collection.

**Audio:** *All the Money in the World* sports an engaging, if not especially showy, DTS-HD MA 5.1 track. Dialogue and music are both handled well, with the latter sounding especially lush. Use of the surrounds is wholly convincing, and ensures that each location has its own distinct acoustic space.

**Extras:** With first *Alien: Covenant* and now this, it looks like the days of feature-packed Ridley Scott discs are officially behind us. All that's on offer here are eight deleted scenes and three sub-10-minute *Making of...* featurettes – one of which is particularly notable for dealing with the challenges brought about by the last-minute recasting/reshoots.



Christopher Plummer (above) reshoot a total of 22 scenes over eight days



## HCC VERDICT

### *All the Money in the World*

→ Sony Pictures → All-region BD  
→ £25

**WE SAY:** There clearly wasn't enough money in the world to produce the Blu-ray extras this film deserves.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★





# Franco performs *Room* service

Terrific comic biopic presents a touching look at the making of a truly terrible film

## → THE DISASTER ARTIST

Since its release in 2003, writer-director-producer-actor Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* has been hailed as one of the worst movies ever made; the 'Citizen Kane of bad movies', as one critic described it. Beset by narrative and technical flaws, not to mention Wiseau's uniquely unconventional acting style, the film has gone on to become a favourite with fans of bad cinema, developing a cult following akin to that of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Based on the book of the same name by actor Greg Sestero and journalist Tom Bissell, this offbeat comedy tells the story of the making of *The Room*. In the process *The Disaster Artist* paints a touching, intimate and funny portrait of the unlikely friendship between aspiring actors Wiseau (James Franco, who also directs) and Sestero (Dave Franco).

It's this last aspect that really makes *The Disaster Artist* work as well as it does. As easy as it would be to simply mock Wiseau, the film does all it can to humanise him (not easy, given how much he continues to shroud himself in secrecy) and explore his motivations. No matter how misguided Wiseau may be nor how much the film gets you to laugh at his missteps and misfortunes, there's never the sense it is simply being cruel.

And before anybody asks: no, you don't need to have watched *The Room* to enjoy this film. And, yes, it is a much, much better movie than *The Room*.

**Picture:** Captured at 6K and finished as a 4K DI for its theatrical release, *The Disaster Artist* looks sensational on Blu-ray. This AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode is infused with rich colours, and the clarity,



sharpness and detail serve to give the imagery a pleasingly three-dimensional quality. Black levels are also perfectly realised throughout.

**Audio:** The subject matter means that *The Disaster Artist*'s DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mix isn't particularly dynamic. Still, there's no denying that it does all that is asked of it very well. Dialogue is crystal-clear (a good thing too given Franco's take on Wiseau's bizarre accent) and surround activity is satisfying, if never especially aggressive.

**Extras:** Pick of the bonus goodies is a boisterous but informative group commentary featuring James Franco, Dave Franco, Tommy Wiseau, Greg Sestero, and screenwriters Scott Neustadter and Michael H Weber. Backing it up are a trio of fairly interesting behind-the-scenes EPK featurettes – *Oh, Hi Mark: Making a Disaster* (13 minutes), *Directing a Disaster* (seven minutes) and *Just a Guy Leaning on a Wall: Getting to Know Tommy* (seven minutes).



**Ironically, James Franco won numerous awards for his performance as Wiseau**

## HCC VERDICT

### The Disaster Artist

→ Warner Bros. → All-region BD  
→ £25

**WE SAY:** Whether or not you're a fan of *The Room*, you'll love this comic tribute and Warner's Blu-ray.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★

## The Super Inframan

88 Films → Region B BD  
£16



Although the Shaw Brothers may be best known for the period martial arts films they produced, they certainly weren't averse to dabbling in other genres. This colourful 1975 superhero flick finds the titular cyborg (Danny Lee) battling the Demon Princess Elizebub (Terry Liu) and her army of charmingly unconvincing rubber monsters. It is of course, utterly ridiculous, but it's also loads of fun. *The Super Inframan* fights its way onto Blu-ray with a good-looking 2.35:1 1080p encode and clean LPCM 2.0 dual-mono versions of both the original Chinese audio and the hilariously awful English dub.



## Dark Blue

Arrow Video → Region B BD  
£20



Arriving hot on the heels of *Training Day*, this 2002 thriller about corruption in the LAPD has several things going for it, including a story by James Ellroy and a great central performance from Kurt Russell. Sadly, director Ron Shelton never seems to have a particularly firm grip on the story and Scott Speedman is his usual charisma-free self as Russell's co-star. When it comes to picture and sound quality, Arrow's BD is comparable to MGM's 2009 US release (which is no bad thing). The major difference is that this UK Blu-ray actually includes all of the original DVD extras.



## The St. Valentine's Day Massacre

Indicator → Region B BD  
£16



This 1967 gangster film is a curious outlier in Roger Corman's career. Best known as a pioneer of low-budget cinema, here Corman was working for Fox and had a \$1m budget and the full resources of the studio to work with. The result is an underrated addition to the genre, whose matter-of-fact, quasi-documentary approach only makes the sudden bursts of violence that much more impactful. Indicator's handsome HD presentation is backed up by some intriguing extras, including a short interview with Corman and the Super 8 version of the film.



## Antiporno

Third Window Films → Region B BD  
£20



Sion Sono's homage to the softcore 'Roman Porno' genre takes the notion of erotic cinema and turns it inside out, using the film's surreal, Russian doll-like structure to expound on the ways in which female sexuality has been portrayed and controlled on screen and in wider Japanese culture. Suffice to say, it's not your typical piece of smutty titillation. Awash with vibrant reds and yellows, *Antiporno* arrives on Blu-ray with a striking AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode. Elsewhere, critic Jasper Sharp's commentary provides the perfect primer for anyone unfamiliar with Japan's cinema sub-cultures.







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'Batou, how many times do I have to tell you? It's not the size that counts...'



## Complex? You bet it is!

Cyberpunk anime doesn't come any bigger or better than this series

### → GHOST IN THE SHELL: STAND ALONE COMPLEX – COMPLETE SERIES COLLECTION: DELUXE EDITION

At the same time as director Mamoru Oshii was working on the long-awaited sequel to his landmark 1995 cyberpunk film *Ghost in the Shell*, over in a different corner of Japanese animation studio Production I.G., fellow director Kenji Kamiyama was hard at work on a smallscreen take on the concept dubbed *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*.

Hitting Japanese TV in 2002, the first season follows the members of the Public Security Section 9 taskforce as they investigate a mysterious 'hacktivist' known only as the Laughing Man – its 26 episodes split between more or less self-contained stories (Stand Alone) and those that make up the ongoing story arc (Complex). A second 26-episode season (*Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex 2nd GIG*) followed in 2004 and saw the Section 9 team getting caught up in a refugee crisis and tackling the Individual Eleven terrorist group.

The two seasons of *GitS: SAC* rank among the best anime TV series ever made. The expanded canvas giving the creators the chance to explore more complicated ideas in far greater detail. The TV format also benefits the supporting cast, offering us a chance to get to know all of the Section 9 team, not just usual focal points Major Kusanagi and Batou.

After disappearing from TV, three OVA ('Original Video Animation') films followed. *The Laughing Man*



#### HCC VERDICT

##### *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex – Complete Series Collection: Deluxe Edition*

→ Manga Entertainment → Region B BD → £100 (Zavvi exclusive)

**WE SAY:** An impressive attempt at assembling the definitive HD release for this landmark anime series.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★

(2005) and *Individual Eleven* (2006) were cut-down film versions of the two TV seasons, focusing solely on the main story arcs for each. The third, *Solid State Society* (2006), was a brand-new story set two years after the events of *2nd GIG*. However, while perfectly enjoyable, this final chapter failed to hit the same highs as the series it followed.

**Picture:** The three OVAs have previously been available to buy on separate Blu-rays in the UK, and those same discs are repackaged here. This means that *The Laughing Man* and *Individual Eleven* still suffer from too much digital sharpening (even the black bars around the 1.85:1 frame have halos).

Thankfully, the episodes of the actual series would appear to derive from fresh HD scans and look absolutely superb. The 1.85:1 visuals are crisp and colourful, with excellent delineation and no trace of any nasty digital artefacts.

**Audio:** The two series and the first two OVAs offer a choice of DTS-HD MA 5.1 English or Japanese mixes, while *Solid State Society* opts for Dolby TrueHD 5.1 tracks instead. In either case, the results are the same: plenty of impactful use of the surrounds, deep bass response, superb musicality and flawless handling of dialogue in both languages.

**Extras:** In addition to the *Tachikoma Days* comic shorts that play at the end of each episode, the two seasons of *GitS: SAC* are supported by archival interviews, trailers and TV spots. The three OVAs carry over the extras from their standalone releases. This set also includes a handsome 100-page book of essays, interviews and episode breakdowns.



## McCabe & Mrs Miller: Premium Collection

Warner Bros. → All-region BD & R2 DVD £16 (HMV exclusive)



Robert Altman has a history of subverting film genres, something fully borne out by his foray into the Western.

Anybody looking for familiar genre thrills should steer well clear of this haunting 1971 film and its despairing, anti-capitalist concerns. Due to its deliberately diffuse photography, previous home releases of *McCabe & Mrs Miller* have generally looked pretty bad – thankfully, this Blu-ray does a much better job of capturing the film's unique aesthetic. As well as the archival *Making of...* and trailer on the Blu-ray, the accompanying DVD adds a commentary.



## Badlands: Premium Collection

Warner Bros. → All-region BD & R2 DVD £16 (HMV exclusive)



Inspired by the Starkweather-Fugate murder spree, director Terrence Malick's 1973 debut feature stars

Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek as the young lovers who go on the run, leaving a trail of corpses in their wake. Lyrical and disturbing in equal measure, *Badlands* is a remarkably powerful film that has long been crying out for a UK Blu-ray release. While this can't match the old Criterion US disc, this UK platter still gives us a very film-like 1.85:1 Full HD presentation, plus a worthwhile bonus in the guise of the 2003 *Absence of Malick* documentary.



## Midnight Cowboy

The Criterion Collection → Region B BD £28



If you were expecting to see a five-star review of Criterion's Blu-ray do-over of this award-winning 1969 drama, you aren't alone. From the brand new 4K restoration to an expanded collection of extras, everything about this release sounded like an improvement over the old MGM release. And sure enough, the new extras are fascinating and the restored 1.85:1 1080p encode reveals far more fine detail and handles grain better. It's just a shame the film has been subjected to a significant teal-pushed colour grade that we certainly found quite distracting.



## Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story

Dogwoof → R2 DVD £16



Given the debates around gender equality and empowerment that are still swirling around Hollywood,

this documentary about the life of actress Hedy Lamarr couldn't feel more timely or tragic. While celebrated for her beauty during the 1940s and '50s, Lamarr's considerable talents as an inventor were overlooked or dismissed. An extraordinary and affecting film, *Bombshell...* arrives on DVD with a pleasing anamorphic transfer, while the DD5.1 track copes well with the mix of talking heads and background music.



# Double-dip for Doctor's dual-role

Rediscovered Patrick Troughton story finally gets the full treatment on DVD. About time, too...

## → DOCTOR WHO: THE ENEMY OF THE WORLD – SPECIAL EDITION

While relaxing on an Australian beach in the year 2018, the Doctor (Patrick Troughton), Jamie (Frazer Hines) and Victoria (Deborah Watling) are targeted by assassins. Learning that he is the exact double of megalomaniacal would-be world leader Ramon Salamander, the Doctor leads his friends on a globe-hopping adventure to stop his nefarious plans.

In a season otherwise consisting solely of 'base-under-siege' stories with Cybermen, Abominable Snowmen, Ice Warriors and even sentient seaweed, the James Bond-esque antics of *The Enemy of the World* have always made it something of an odd-one-out. It didn't help the story's reputation that until recently only one of its six episodes was known to exist (a rather static and talky one, at that).

The discovery of the five missing episodes in Nigeria and a subsequent rush-released barebones DVD in 2013 led to a wholesale re-evaluation of the story; its differences from anything else the show was doing at the time now seen as a cause for celebration rather than something to shun. Unfortunately it wasn't given the same lavish treatment as the earlier titles in the classic *Doctor Who* DVD range. Until now, that is...

**Picture:** While all six episodes were restored for the original DVD, the intervening years have seen sufficient improvements in the tech for the team to give them an additional spruce up for this re-release. Without having a copy of the original to hand, it's



hard to tell just how much better the new 1.33:1 transfers look, but judged on its own merits the monochrome imagery is as crisp and clean as you could really hope for from a vintage *Doctor Who* serial with a track record like this one.

**Audio:** The dual-mono soundtrack is a little lacking in range, but handles the dialogue, Foley effects and music fairly well. Meanwhile, the clean-up work ensures that all hisses, crackles and other age-related distortion have been eliminated.

**Extras:** Disc One houses the six-part serial, plus a chat-track, production subtitles and a 1967 TV spot. Disc Two plays host to an hour-long hunt to uncover previously unknown info about the making of the story; featurettes about the recovery of the episodes and their restoration; a photo gallery; PDF material (scripts and *Radio Times* listings); an old VHS intro from John Pertwee; and a moving half-hour tribute to Deborah Watling, who passed away last year.



Remembering Deborah Watling (above) pays tribute to the late actress



## HCC VERDICT

### Doctor Who: The Enemy of the World – Special Edition

→ BBC Worldwide → R2 DVD → £20

**WE SAY:** It's taken the best part of five years, but this rediscovered story finally has the DVD it deserves.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

'When I asked for a new belt for my birthday, this isn't what I had in mind'



# It's only a game. Or is it?

David Cronenberg bids farewell to body-horror with this oddly prophetic science-fiction thriller

## → **eXISTENZ**

During a demonstration of her latest virtual reality title, *eXistenZ*, an attempt is made on the life of renowned game designer Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh). While her security detail deals with the would-be assassin, Geller flees for her life accompanied by marketing trainee Ted Pikul (Jude Law). Worried that the attack might have damaged her 'game pod' and the code for *eXistenZ*, the pair enter the game – only to find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between the game and reality.

It's a curious coincidence that *eXistenZ* arrived in cinemas in the same year as *The Matrix*. Following some terrible adaptations of videogames, audiences were suddenly given two films that used gaming and virtual reality to explore ideas of reality and perception. While *The Matrix* did this through innovative 'bullet-time' action scenes, *eXistenZ* takes a darker and far twistier route with a story that refuses to allow you (or the film's characters) to entirely trust anything that's happening.

Of course, this isn't the first time that writer-director David Cronenberg has gone down this route. And if *eXistenZ* doesn't quite have the same impact as his 1983 masterpiece *Videodrome*, it turned out to be similarly prescient when it came to exploring how people interact with technology. In 2018 we're not quite at the stage of techno-biological 'game pods' that plug directly into our bodies with 'Umbycords' (this is a David Cronenberg film after all), but the organic designs are closer to current tech than the



***eXistenZ* has so many layers of reality, it makes *Inception* look like *The A-Team***

bulky computers seen in most sci-fi films of the era. Even more outlandish elements such as the scanner-beating bone guns now have a real-world analogue in 3D-printed weapons.

*The Matrix* may have grabbed all of the attention back in 1999, but *eXistenZ* is a smart and gripping piece of sci-fi. And its surprisingly prophetic nature has only increased its stature and power over the past two decades.

**Picture:** For this UK edition 101 Films has licensed the HD master prepared by Turbine for its recent German release. While this undoubtedly represents a massive step-up in quality from the old DNR-splattered 1080i US disc, it still suffers from being based on an old HD master. All of the tell-tale signs are there, from halos to a slightly digital appearance to the overall image. Not bad then, but there's still room for improvement.

**Audio:** *eXistenZ* features a fairly effective LPCM 5.1 soundtrack that employs the rears for both ambient effect (the busy restaurant kitchen, Chapter 5) and for less diagenetic audio cues (the electronic noises that accompany the second visit to Nader's shop, Chapter 6). An LPCM stereo track is also included.

**Extras:** Three commentaries (by David Cronenberg; critics Kim Newman and Ryan Lambie; and genre buffs Nathaniel Thompson and Edwin Samuelson) head up an impressive collection of bonus bits. Also included are a new interview with Christopher Eccleston; an hour-long documentary about production designer Carol Spier; three archival promo featurettes; five EPK interviews; the trailer; and an exclusive booklet.

## HCC VERDICT

### *eXistenZ*

→ 101 Films Black Label  
→ Region B BD & R2 DVD → £15

**WE SAY:** It's game on for 101 Films with this impressive debut release from its new Blu-ray imprint.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★



## Nightmares

101 Films → Region B BD & R2 DVD  
£20



The biggest problem with this 1983 horror anthology is that it started out as the pilot for an NBC TV series

that wasn't picked up. So, outside of a specially shot opening scene, the four stories are lacking in anything deemed too gruesome for early '80s US TV. That said, the stories themselves aren't without their pleasures – particularly the third, which pits Lance Henriksen's troubled priest against Satan's pick-up truck... This solid Blu-ray partners an authentically grainy 1080p widescreen presentation of the film with a fullscreen SD version and a commentary from two genre fans.



## Tremors: A Cold Day in Hell

Universal Pictures → All-region BD  
£16



If you've stuck with the *Tremors* franchise this far then you'll know just what you're in for with this sixth instalment.

Heck, the only real difference is that the Graboid hunting has now moved to the Canadian Arctic – albeit during a freak heat wave, so it looks like South Africa (the shooting location) with the colour dialled right back. Despite the rather chilly picture grading, the Blu-ray's AVC 1.78:1 Full HD encode remains pleasingly sharp, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio packs some hefty bass. A trio of behind-the-scenes featurettes round out the disc.



## The Bone Yard

88 Films → Region B BD  
£16



Goopy gore, demonic children and a monster poodle are just some of the treats awaiting you in this largely forgotten

1991 horror-comedy from former special effects artist James Cummins. Ripe for rediscovery, *The Boneyard* makes its BD debut on a disc that has plenty to entice genre fans. In addition to a strong HD presentation (sourced from the original 35mm negative) and energetic LPCM 2.0 stereo soundtrack, 88 Films has also assembled a solid selection of extras in the form of a chat-track from Cummins and producer Richard F. Brophy, three archival interviews and the trailer.



## Rawhead Rex

Arrow Video → Region B BD  
£25



Loosely adapted from a short story by Clive Barker, this 1986 film ditches the author's driving concept of a

giant fanged phallus on the rampage and replaces it with something that looks like it should be fronting the metal band GWAR. While the end result is unlikely to please fans of Barker's story, judged as a straightforward monster movie, it's fairly entertaining. Granted a 4K restoration, ...*Rex* also makes for an impressive BD release. Extras are both plentiful and informative – our favourite being a look at an abandoned graphic novel adaptation of Barker's original story.



# Fright franchise runs out of steam

Supernatural series needs to shake things up if it's to have a ghost of a chance of carrying on

## → INSIDIOUS: THE LAST KEY

When it comes to franchise chronologies, this spooky series is even more tangled than *Fast & Furious*. Having killed off parapsychologist Elise Rainier (Lin Shaye) at the end of *Insidious* (2010), direct follow-up *Insidious: Chapter 2* (2013) had no choice but to bring her back as a ghost. As this was something of a (literal) dead-end for the character, *Insidious: Chapter 3* (2015) opted to roll back the clock to recount an earlier, unrelated, supernatural encounter from Elise's past.

Which brings us to *Insidious: The Last Key*, which takes place in the gap between the third and first films, while also flashing back to the 1950s to uncover Elise's own childhood horrors. This time Elise and fellow paranormal investigators Tucker (Angus Sampson) and Specs (Leigh Whannell) answer a call for help from the current owner of her childhood home in New Mexico and encounter another supernatural evil, one that threatens Elise's own family.

As refreshing as it is to have a horror franchise that revolves around a 74-year-old actress rather than some twenty-something starlets, *Insidious: The Last Key* does neither Lin Shaye nor her character any justice. The windows into Elise's past are interesting, but they're couched in a thoroughly conventional spook-house ride that never once deviates from the established franchise formula.

The result is an occasionally effective, but utterly generic ghost story. And if it really does prove to be Elise's final adventure, it's a disappointing way for the character (and actress) to bow out.



**Picture:** As with its predecessors, *Insidious: The Last Key* is a dark film. While there's a handful of scenes shot in daylight exteriors,

the bulk of the action takes place in gloomy interiors. For the most part the AVC 2.40:1 1080p image copes well with this pervading darkness, but there are some instances of banding in bright torch-light. Sharpness and detailing are never really a problem, although colours can be a little flat.

**Audio:** Loud noises remain the franchise's chief scare tactic – and these sudden shifts in volume and dynamic range are as well-presented as you could hope for. Even away from these moments, the film's DTS-HD MA mix is a tactile affair that makes modest yet effective use of the 5.1 soundscape to pepper you with discrete atmospheric effects.

**Extras:** Apart from eight interesting deleted scenes and an alternate ending, the only other extras are three disappointingly shallow promo featurettes.



'Key Face' (above) is the latest in the series' pantheon of nightmarish ghouls

## HCC VERDICT

### *Insidious: The Last Key*

→ Sony Pictures → All-region BD  
→ £25

**WE SAY:** A mediocre franchise outing on a modest Blu-ray platter. One for die-hard fans only.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★

# In space no one can here you stream

It's 'Danger, Will Robinson!' all over again as Netflix wipes away memories of *that* 1998 disaster

## → LOST IN SPACE: SEASON ONE

Netflix seems to have a thing for sci-fi. From *Star Trek: Discovery* to *Altered Carbon*, the streaming service is proving a haven for big-budget, episodic SF. Now we can add a reboot of Irwin Allen's 1960s classic *Lost in Space* to its roster. All ten episodes of Season One are now available to subscribers, and the good news is this reimagining of the Space Family Robinson is a lot of fun, and a more faithful treatment than the 1998 movie. Writers Matt Sazama and Burk Sharpless have managed to retain all the show's key character dynamics, while dropping some new twists for their inaugural run.

It is still a family show in its broadest sense. However, the relationship between mother Maureen Robinson (Molly Parker) and dad John (Toby Stephens) has become more nuanced; here they're estranged if not fully dysfunctional. Will (Max Jenkins) remains something of a boy genius. Sister Penny (Mina Sundwall) has become the family wisecracker, while Judy (Taylor Russell) never quite recovers from an opening episode freeze.

Allen's much loved original veered from serious monochrome sci-fi to pantomime camp. Today we get Young Adult sci-fi – the first episode a breathless run from one cliff-hanger to another, at times feeling a little like *The 100*.

Enjoyable, certainly, but it remains to be seen just where this version will go. Making a

'Lemme guess – this is dangerous, right?'



family survival drama out of *Lost in Space* is all well and good, but you can only scurry around the forests of Vancouver for so long before interest wanes.

**Picture:** Streaming in 4K HDR, image quality is great and will reward those with larger UHD screens. Shot on a Red Helium 8K camera, the interiors of the Jupiter 2 are astonishingly detailed and realistic, although for the most part the use of peak highlights is subtle – this is no lens flare fest.

For those with capable displays, the stream is available in Dolby Vision.

**Audio:** LiS's DD 5.1/Atmos mix is effective, quickly drawing attention from the initial crash and through subsequent set-pieces. Chris Lennertz's score adds to the cinematic feel, and pleasingly still has John Williams' original theme woven in. It wouldn't be *Lost in Space* without it.



## HCC VERDICT

### *Lost in Space: Season One*

→ Netflix Original

**WE SAY:** An accomplished and fine-looking reboot of a fan-favourite. Roll on S2.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

**OVERALL:** ★★★★★



## → ANNIHILATION

→ Netflix (Paramount)

More alien infestation than extraterrestrial invasion, Alex Garland's adaptation of Jeff Vandermeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy opener, is mesmerising, oblique and not a little weird. The movie opens with a meteor strike in an undisclosed area, only there's no impact crater. Instead, a slowly expanding bubble, known as The Shimmer, begins to engulf local swamplands – inside reality warps and the wildlife mutates. Scientific experts Natalie Portman, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Gina Rodriguez are sent in to investigate...

Over in the US, *Annihilation* is getting a 4K Blu-ray release with Atmos audio, after a theatrical run. Here, though, it's only available on Netflix, after Paramount sold international rights to the streaming giant.

It's not hard to see why the studio cut and run. With its soporific tone, this isn't a popcorn movie. One of a growing genre of movies from 'unfilmable' novels, this is sci-fi with a squishy, gruesome centre.

Image quality is good, but not outstanding. Available in 2160p HDR10 or Dolby Vision depending on your display, the psychedelic Shimmer looks inviting, but image depth seems a tad limited. On the plus side, Garland (writer/director of *Ex Machina*) keeps his 21:9 frame uncluttered and calm, which makes the sporadic violence even more unsettling.

The 5.1 sound design, by Glenn Freemantle, is rather more engaging. Just as he did with *Gravity*, Freemantle's soundstage is as much about what you don't hear as what you do. Of course, he makes effective use of the surrounds where appropriate; on the outskirts of the Shimmer, thunder rumbles in the round, and when the group unload heavy weaponry, the soundtrack drops deep and fast. The score, all pulsating strings, is also sympathetically disturbing.

You'll be thinking about this flick long after the final credits have rolled. That 4K BD is a tempter...

★★★★★



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Collecting...

# Tom Hanks

Period drama *The Post*, now out on Blu-ray, is the latest flick in Hanks' award-winning, genre-straddling career. **Team HCC** selects ten of his essential movies

## APOLLO 13

Hanks, Bill Paxton and Kevin Bacon impress as the crew of the malfunctioning craft in this peerless 1995 drama based on the disastrous Apollo 13 mission to the Moon. Yet what sticks in the memory is the assuredness with which director Ron Howard juggles the film's detail-rich script and claustrophobic locations. The result is a nail-biting cinematic experience where the tension is cranked higher and higher.

**Get it:** Universal Pictures' 20th Anniversary Edition Blu-ray benefitted from a 4K scan of the original elements; last year's Ultra HD Blu-ray release went one better by adding sympathetic HDR grading and a DTS:X soundmix. Yet completists will also want the movie's 2005 US DVD release, as it packs the 40-minute-shorter IMAX edit, which was released theatrically in 2002.



TOP PICK



## SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE

In 1993, when rom-coms weren't crammed full of physical comedy and puerile gags, Hanks and Meg Ryan double-headed this uncomplicated, sweet-natured tale of star-crossed lovers (but share little screentime together). Owing plenty to vintage Hollywood flicks – it directly references *An Affair to Remember* – this is all about tugging your heart-strings.

**Get it:** Oddly unavailable on UK BD, so look to other territories or get the DVD release instead.



## SAVING PRIVATE RYAN

A favourite with home cinema fans thanks to its terrifying soundmix, Spielberg's 1998 drama casts Hanks as a US Army captain trying to follow his own moral compass amidst the carnage of a WW2 rescue mission. Much copied since, but rarely bettered.

**Get it:** Paramount's two-disc BD from 2010 was a fine upgrade on the flick's previous home media incarnations. We hope a 4K Blu-ray, just released in the US with Dolby Atmos audio, will continue that trend.



## DRAGNET

The best of Hanks' early-career comedies, this 1987 outing is less a film remake of '50s TV series *Dragnet*, and more an affectionate, yet outlandish, parody. Hanks (Detective Streebek) and Dan Ackroyd (Sergeant Friday) excel as the chalk-and-cheese cops on the trail of a mysterious cult led by Christopher Plummer's televangelist. Fast-paced and fun.

**Get it:** The extras-lite UK Blu-ray release of 2016 from Fabulous Films is probably the best *Dragnet* fans can expect. And it's bargain-priced.



## CLOUD ATLAS

The Wachowskis' adaptation of David Mitchell's sci-fi novel sees Hanks play six different characters across six different settings/eras. At times incomprehensible and too ambitious for its own good, *Cloud Atlas* (2012) remains a startling piece of mood-board filmmaking. Hanks says it's the only one of his films he's watched more than twice.

**Get it:** Warner issued the movie on Blu-ray in 2012 and hasn't returned to it since. The disc looks and sounds great, but more in-depth extras would be nice.





## FORREST GUMP

It may have its twee moments, but there's no denying the appeal of *Forrest Gump*'s comedic, bittersweet trawl through modern US history. Robert Zemeckis' clever visual trickery is matched by Hanks' performance as the nice-but-dim title character.

**Get it:** The current single-disc BD release jettisons the meaty extras of *Forrest Gump*'s 2009 double-disc debut. However, Paramount has selected this archive title for a 4K outing in the US (due June), which includes the disc of extras. A Zavvi-exclusive two-disc UK Blu-ray Steelbook edition has also just launched.



## THE 'BURBS

Hanks tops the bill in this 1989 black comedy directed by Joe Dante that has deservedly gained a cult following. *The 'burbs* bundles nods to Sergio Leone Westerns and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* amidst its tale of residents of a suburban cul-de-sac dealing with new arrivals who may or may not be up to no good...

**Get it:** Arrow Video's 2014 BD release gives the film a great-looking 1080p transfer and superb extras including Dante's 'rough cut' of the movie sourced from his own VHS tape.



## ROAD TO PERDITION

Hanks went against type in 2002 to play a mob killer seeking vengeance for his wife's murder – his task hampered by having his son in tow – in this brilliant graphic novel adaptation helmed by Sam 'Skyfall' Mendes. Cinematographer Conrad Hall drapes the 1930s-set action in shadowy visuals, and nabbed an Oscar for his efforts.

**Get it:** There are good extras on the 2010 Blu-ray, including a Mendes chat track and a new feature not found on the previous DVD. The AV presentation is top-class too.



## BRIDGE OF SPIES

Another Hanks/Spielberg collaboration (from 2015), this time based on a script by Joel and Ethan Coen that mines the true story of a Cold War spy swap. Oscar-nominated for Best Picture, this is an A-grade thriller bolstered by lush cinematography and painstaking attention to detail.

**Get it:** The 2016 Blu-ray from Fox looks magnificent, while DTS-HD MA 7.1 sonics favour immersive ambience over wall-shaking bombast. Yet for a film so rich in real-life history, the selection of bonus features here feels somewhat under-cooked.

## CAPTAIN PHILLIPS

Director Paul Greengrass proved the perfect fit for this 2013 thriller, bringing his energetic camerawork and sense of realism to its true-life tale of a US merchant ship stormed by Somali pirates. There's intense chemistry between Hanks and newcomer Barkhad Abdi, as captive and captor respectively, and a straightforward approach to the narrative that allows Greengrass to construct some taut set-pieces.

**Get it:** Sony's 'Mastered in 4K' Blu-ray packs a solid commentary from Greengrass, a trio of lengthy featurettes and a 1080p transfer that gets the best from the movie's varied cinematography. It wouldn't be a surprise to see the studio revisit this title on 4K Blu.



Have we missed one of your favourite Tom Hanks movies?  
Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)



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Issue No.282

Issue No.283

**Issue No.284**

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# SELECT

→ **GEAR GUIDE** **TELEVISIONS** From entry-level 40in LEDs to flagship 4K monsters  
**BLU-RAY PLAYERS** Which deck rules the roost? **PROJECTORS** It's time to blow up your video!  
**AV RECEIVERS** 5.1, 7.1, 11.2 – we've got all the options covered **SPEAKERS** Killer surround sound setups  
for all rooms and budgets **PVRs** Including super-slim Freeview boxes and Sky Q **AND MORE!**



**LOOKING  
FOR A NEW  
FLATSCREEN?**  
Our **Top 10**  
guide is here  
to help

## HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

## TOP 10 Televisions

01



NEW ENTRY

**Samsung QE65QFN** → £3,800 ★★★★★

Revised QLED technology and the implementation of a local dimming backlight reap astonishing picture quality rewards with this bright, colourful 4K HDR hero. Great usability and smart platform, too. *HCC #285*



02

**Sony KD-65ZD9** → £3,000 ★★★★★

Full-array LED TV (with advanced local dimming tech) that claims a 1,800-nit peak brightness and DV support. Cinematic, sublime pictures – the 100in version [*HCC #282*] is even more impressive. *HCC #267*

03

**Sony KD-55A1**

→ £2,800 ★★★★★

Another Sony set due a Dolby Vision upgrade, this 55in OLED dazzles with its image quality (including superb motion processing), hidden Acoustic Surface speaker technology and eye-catching styling. *HCC #275*

04

**LG OLED65E7**

→ £3,800 ★★★★★

3D playback is dropped, but the E7 offers welcome picture improvements over last year's E6, particularly brightness and near-black talents. Supports Dolby Vision. *HCC #274*

05

**Panasonic TX-55EZ952**

→ £2,000 ★★★★★

A 55in OLED TV with an effortlessly naturalistic performance, although not as bright as some rivals. Gorgeous, understated design and premium build quality. *HCC #277*

06



NEW ENTRY

**Sony KD-55XF9005**

→ £1,700 ★★★★★

Impressive backlighting, dynamic HDR images and top-quality motion processing are the major draws of this mid-tier Bravia. Android OS still needs improvement, though. *HCC #285*

07

**Philips 55POS9002**

→ £2,000 ★★★★★

Philips' second-gen Android-powered OLED takes a more refined approach to its processing, focusing on balanced cinematic imagery. Ambilight, as usual, boosts your immersion. *HCC #276*

08

**Samsung UE49MU7000**

→ £750 ★★★★★

Not one of Samsung's top-flight TVs, but a cracking mid-range 49in model that presents 4K and HD material with bright, rich colours and stable blacks. Good choice for an affordable setup. *HCC #277*

09

**Panasonic TX-65EX750**

→ £1,500 ★★★★★

A (surprise!) 3D-capable LED screen that offers well-controlled backlighting, pleasing 4K clarity and good HD upscaling. Not the brightest around, and some colour inconsistencies. *HCC #279*

10

**LG 55SJ850V**

→ £900 ★★★★★

Backlight distractions hinder this set's performance in low-lit rooms, but it's a strong all-rounder, offering Dolby Vision HDR, WebOS smarts, well-rounded sonics and a bargain price tag. *HCC #276*

## TOP 5 Blu-ray movies

**Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle**

Enjoyable reboot/sequel to the '90s family flick, with Dwayne Johnson leading the cast. A reference-grade 1080p image is joined by active DTS-HD MA sonics – but no Atmos. *HCC #285*

★★★★★

**Star Wars: The Last Jedi [Ultra HD Blu-ray]**

Rian Johnson delivers another slice of sci-fi spectacular that sees the franchise move in an unexpected new direction. The 4K platter marries Dolby Atmos with Dolby Vision. *HCC #285*

★★★★★

**Only the Brave**

Josh Brolin stars in this powerful drama about wildfire-fighters in the American southwest, which burns bright on BD courtesy of an excellent 1080p image and even more impressive DTS-HD MA 5.1 track. *HCC #284*

★★★★★

**Blade of the Immortal**

The latest film from prolific Japanese director Miike Takashi is a riveting Samurai actioner bookended by audacious fight scenes. Arrow's BD offers solid AV quality and a real wealth of bonus bits. *HCC #285*

★★★★★

**Coco [Ultra HD Blu-ray]**

Pixar returns to form with this quirky tale of a boy trapped in the Land of the Dead. The Atmos track isn't a standout effort, but the 4K visuals on this US import are gorgeous, and there are some fun extras. *HCC #284*

★★★★★



# TOP 10 Blu-rays

01



## Oppo UDP-203 → £650 ★★★★★

Oppo refreshes its player hardware with a superb universal design with Ultra HD playback including Dolby Vision HDR. Packed with user adjustments and connectivity. No apps or Darbee processing, though. HCC #269

02



## Oppo UDP-205 → £1,400 ★★★★★

This pricey, peerless UHD deck flaunts universal disc playback, asynchronous USB input, headphone amp and balanced stereo outs amongst its audiophile features. One for musos. HCC #274

03



## Sony UBP-X800 → £270 ★★★★★

Sony embraces UHD Blu-ray with a full-width, sturdy design that'll also spin DVD-A and SACD platters. A great all-rounder, but no current Dolby Vision support or word on an update. HCC #274

04



## Panasonic DMP-UB900 → £370 ★★★★★

The Ultra HD Blu-ray format got an inspiring debut in Panasonic's multi-talented deck that offers a sterling picture performance, 4K-enabled VOD apps and analogue audio outs. No DV. HCC #259

05



## Sony UBP-X700 → £250 ★★★★★

A compact player promised a DV update this Summer, the UBP-X700 has a nondescript design, no analogue outs and a stubby remote. But it plays great, and offers SACD support. HCC #284

06



## Cambridge Audio CXUHD → £800 ★★★★★

The lack of analogue outputs is a surprise considering CA's heritage, but this universal (and DV-capable) deck sounds sweet over its digital outs. As with Oppo's UDP-203, a MediaTek SoC is used. HCC #279

07



## Panasonic DMP-UB700 → £300 ★★★★★

Shorn of some of the audiophile niceties of the UB900 (including multichannel analogue outputs), but still a safe pair of hands with your 4K BDs. And at a bargain price. HCC #270

08



## Panasonic DMP-UB300 → £130 ★★★★★

Great 4K imagery from this bargain deck, but you might prefer to up your budget for the UB700 – no split HDMI, optical/coaxial or Wi-Fi connections here. Half-size design for an easy install. HCC #272

09



## Samsung UBD-K8500 → £180 ★★★★★

Debut Ultra HD Blu-ray player that finds fans courtesy of its sensible price point (now even lower), connected smarts and eye-catching visuals. Build quality is a little uninspiring. HCC #260

10



## Samsung UBD-M9500 → £230 ★★★★★

Second-gen 4K player that adds features (mobile BD streaming, 360-degree image support) but removes 3D playback capability. As before, the chassis is curved. UHD discs look pin-sharp. HCC #275

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Photo courtesy of UK Home Cinemas

## TOP 10 Projectors



### 01 Sony VPL-VW760ES → £15,000 ★★★★★

This premium beamer adds laser illumination to Sony's 4K SXRD projection technology, and the results are staggering. It's not super-bright, but images are detailed, vivid and supremely well-balanced. Worthy of flagship status. HCC #283



### 02 JVC DLA-X5900 → £4,000 ★★★★★

An outstanding performer at this price point. JVC's latest D-ILA model may lack native 4K silicon but its eShift 4K engine shows real improvement and HDR playback has been greatly boosted too. A compelling home cinema PJ. HCC #282



### 03 Sony VPL-VW360ES

→ £7,000 ★★★★★

In Sony's 4K range between the laser-based VW760ES and entry-level 260ES you'll find this accomplished beamer. Excellent imagery with both SDR and HDR. Motorised controls.

HCC #284



NEW ENTRY

### 04 Vivitek HK2288

→ £2,500 ★★★★★

The Taiwanese brand returns to the UK with a 4K DLP PJ that balances impressive HDR brightness with stable images. Excellent remote control and decent zoom and throw options.

HCC #285



### 05 Optoma UHZ65

→ £5,000 ★★★★★

The asking price here reflects Optoma's addition of laser illumination (yielding improved contrast and far greater 'lamp' life) to the DLP 4K and HDR playback talents of its stablemates.

HCC #282



### 06 Acer VL7860

→ £3,500 ★★★★★

Laser 4K DLP projector that misses out on the contrast performance of some models, but undercuts them in terms of pricing. Use the Silent mode for whisper-quiet operation.

HCC #284



### 07 Epson EH-TW6700

→ £1,300 ★★★★★

HDR and 4K scaling are off the menu, leaving this mid-range model to concentrate on cinematic HD images. Bright, crisp performance, plenty of tweaks, but no 12V trigger.

HCC #271



### 08 Sony VPL-VW260ES

→ £5,200 ★★★★★

Sony's base-level 4K PJ comes with a few strings attached (brightness and colour range are limited), but it's a tempter for anyone spec'ing a UHD theatre.

HCC #280



### 09 Epson EH-TW7300

→ £2,200 ★★★★★

Similar performance traits to its bigger EH-TW9300 sibling, but with reductions in max brightness (and claimed contrast). 4K upscaler, rather than native, with HDR playback.

HCC #269



### 10 BenQ W1050

→ £500 ★★★★★

There are a few cut corners on this budget DLP 1080p model (no backlight on the remote, no lens shift, a meagre zoom), but overall movie performance is good for the money.

HCC #283

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# TOP 10 Speakers



NEW ENTRY

**Bowers & Wilkins 700 Series 5.1** → £7,350 ★★★★★  
This multichannel package finds the larger models in B&W's newly minted 700 Series proving their mettle. This offers formidable power and precision, seamless integration, an expressive mid-band and detailed highs. Excellent. *HCC #285*



**Wharfedale DX-2** → £450 ★★★★★  
The asking price of this 5.1 system will tell you it doesn't deliver the last word in surround sound fidelity, but Wharfedale's package is compact, well-made and faultlessly delivers on its home-cinema-on-a-budget promise. *HCC #283*



**Monitor Audio Gold 300AV** → £7,150 ★★★★★  
This big-ticket package excels across the frequency range, offers exquisite design and packs setup flexibility via the dipole/monopole FX surrounds. *HCC #251*



**KEF Q Series 5.1.2** → £3,300 ★★★★★  
KEF's revamped Q Series now offers Atmos modules for an up-to-the-minute sonic experience. Big, bold-looking speakers. Robust, immersive audio. *HCC #280*



**KEF R Series 7.1** → £6,500 ★★★★★  
A 7.1 set mixing dipolar and direct surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*



**ATC HTS7 5.1** → £3,500 ★★★★★  
Brit brand ATC rejigs the driver tech and neutral sound of its SCM range into a wall-mountable, flexible system perfect for discreet AV setups. *HCC #275*



**Monitor Audio Silver 500 5.1** → £3,650 ★★★★★  
The new Silver range offers a potent EQ-able sub, sweet design, dipole surrounds and largescale, nuanced sonics. Atmos upfiring models would be nice, though. *HCC #282*



**Wharfedale Diamond 11 HCP** → £800 ★★★★★  
Bookshelf speakers and 10in sub combine in a system that offers mid-range and treble finesse and a healthy dollop of boisterous bass. Fun and affordable. *HCC #279*



**Q Acoustics 7000i 5.1 Slim** → £1,000 ★★★★★  
Consistent tonality and detail retrieval are the standout elements here, joined by a cute, easy-to-accommodate design – particularly the 7060S sub. *HCC #284*



**Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2** → £1,200 ★★★★★  
Enjoyable-sounding and well-priced sub/sat system with Atmos upfiring in front L/R enclosures. Not the smallest 'satellite' speakers around. *HCC #276*

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Photo courtesy of UK Home Cinemas



# TOP 10 AV Receivers/AV Processors



## 01 Denon AVR-X6400H → £2,100 ★★★★★

This receiver's 11 channels of power are joined by Atmos, DTS:X and integrated Auro-3D, plus HEOS multiroom integration, making it peerlessly flexible. Sound delivery is quick-footed and articulate. A superb one-box solution. HCC #280



## 02 Arcam AVR850 → £4,500 ★★★★★

High-end seven-channel AVR marrying Class G amplification and Atmos (and future DTS:X) support with talented Dirac Live Room EQ. 11-channel pre-outs for full-fat setups. HCC #257



## 03 Denon AVC-X8500H → £3,300 ★★★★★

For those who want to go even bigger with their Atmos/DTS:X system, this flagship provides 13 channels of power. Setup can be complex, and there's no FM tuner, but otherwise this is first-class. HCC #285



## 04 Marantz NR1608 → £600 ★★★★★

With a smoother sound signature than before and the addition of HEOS multiroom, Marantz's 7.1-channel slim-line AVR flies the flag for living-room friendly AV. Only one HDMI out, though. HCC #278



## 05 Sony STR-DN1080 → £550 ★★★★★

Sony is back in the AVR game with a first Atmos model that adds worthy phantom rear speaker processing to its 5.1.2 sonics. A few UI niggles don't take much of the shine off an impressive budget buy. HCC #277



## 06 Marantz SR8012 → £2,700 ★★★★★

Marantz joins the 11-channel arms race with an AVR that benefits from a beefed-up power stage. As with the Denon X6400H, format support includes Auro-3D. Sophisticated sonics. HCC #284



## 07 Pioneer VSX-1131 → £550 ★★★★★

Seven-channel model with Atmos and DTS:X support that features an overhauled remote control and UI to improve usability. Bass-rich, energetic sound. HCC #265



## 08 NAD T 777 V3 → £2,500 ★★★★★

Dirac-enabled seven-channel AVR (with 11-channel processing). Powerful, even-handed sonics and easy to use, but a firmware update is still awaited for DTS:X decoding. HCC #285



## 09 Yamaha RX-A860 → £900 ★★★★★

Only seven channels and hindered by only three HDCP 2.2-enabled HDMI inputs, but beyond that this flexible MusicCast AVR proves a great listen, with plenty of DSP toys. HCC #270



## 10 Denon HEOS AVR → £800 ★★★★★

Able to run wireless rears/sub (using HEOS models) and sporting a display-free design, this is a five-channel AVR with a different approach. One for HEOS devotees only. HCC #276

# TOP 5 Bonus features



## mother! The Downward Spiral

Darren Aronofsky's off-beat psychological thriller isn't for everyone, but this doc provides fascinating insight into the film's conception, planning and 16mm capture. HCC #282

★★★★★



## Kingsman: Inside the Golden Circle

A near two-hour doc, split into nine parts, is perhaps more than this hit-n-miss sequel deserves, but there's plenty of info and insight here into K2's production. HCC #283

★★★★★



## Thor Ragnarok: Director's Commentary

Taika Waititi delivers an oddball, frequently hilarious chat track that fits this movie's anarchic nature well. A fine solo effort, albeit with an unexpected guest star... HCC #284

★★★★★



## The Director and the Jedi

This 95-minute *Making of...* documentary is the must-see extra on *The Last Jedi*'s BD. More than just a typical overview of the film's production, this is skilfully edited and utterly absorbing. HCC #285

★★★★★



## You Must Remember This: The Warner Bros. Story

The 480i image isn't great, but this 289-minute film charting WB's rise to the top of Hollywood is a brilliant addition to the *Casablanca: Premium Collection* BD. HCC #284

★★★★★



# TOP 10 Subwoofers



## 01 SVS SB-2000 → £600 ★★★★★

This follow up to the SB-1000 offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbibes Blu-rays with quick, taut and potent LFE, it's a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. HCC #233



## 02 REL No.25 → £6,500 ★★★★★

REL celebrates its 25th anniversary in style with this 15in/1,000W premium concoction that exhibits exhilarating speed and nuance down to serious depths. Big, but beautiful. HCC #271



## 03 Bowers & Wilkins DB1D

→ £3,750 ★★★★★

This sequel to the DB1 moves EQ to an app and changes driver/amp design. Beautifully controlled performance with depth and detail. Gorgeous bodywork. HCC #277



## 04 JL Audio Fathom f212v2

→ £6,500 ★★★★★

A second outing for JL's 2 x 12in monster, with an increase in power (3,600W) and room EQ improvements among the changes. Sounds as good as you'd imagine. HCC #261



## 05 SVS SB16-Ultra

→ £2,500 ★★★★★

A 16in driver and 1,500W amp combine to give SVS's flagship sealed sub real appeal. Goes low but remains tight and fast. App-assisted EQ and operation. HCC #270



## 06 REL T7i

→ £850 ★★★★★

Easy to house 8in sub (with 10in passive driver). Decent LF extension joined by superb speed. Wireless transmission via optional (£200) system. HCC #277



## 07 SVS SB-4000

→ £1,800 ★★★★★

Similar in operation and styling to the SB16-Ultra flagship, but smaller and more affordable. Superior DSP results in a real sense of control. HCC #284



## 08 BK Electronics P12-300SB-DF

→ £475 ★★★★★

Bass heads can get outrageous value for money in the shape of BK's overperforming 12in sub. A front-firing model is also offered. HCC #247



## 09 GoldenEar SuperSub X

→ £1,450 ★★★★★

Four drivers squeezed into a relatively compact design and given plenty of push from a 1,400W amp. Standout traits are impact and depth. HCC #272



## 10 KEF Kube10b

→ £600 ★★★★★

The middle option of KEF's new Kube range packs a 10in driver, 300W Class D amp and 56-bit DSP engine to maintain efficient low-frequency control. HCC #283

# TOP 5 Console games



## Uncharted: Lost Legacy

The Drake brothers are replaced by two new heroines in the latest instalment of Sony's PlayStation puzzler. The open-world element hides the relatively short nature of its story mode; HDR visuals are stunning. HCC #277

★★★★★



## Call of Duty: WWII

Eschewing the more fantastical elements of recent COD entries and giving greater emphasis to tactics and staying alive, this is a reminder of why the FPS franchise is so well loved. Superb sound FX, too. HCC #282

★★★★★



## Monster Hunter: World

This series breaks out of its Nintendo origins to offer PS4/Xbox One owners varied, open-world gameplay, plus HDR and better-than-HD visuals that can be tailored to your desire. Monstrous fun. HCC #283

★★★★★



## Super Mario Odyssey

Mario returns in this standout title for Nintendo's Switch console that endows its platforming fun with superior game mechanics, eye-popping visuals and a foot-tapping score. A genuine masterpiece. HCC #280

★★★★★



## Far Cry 5

A cautious update on its predecessor, but there's still plenty of fun gameplay to be had in this open-world first-person shooter. Plays in native 4K HDR on Xbox One X, and better-than-HD on PS4 Pro. HCC #285

★★★★★

## TOP 10 Accessories



### 01 KEF R50 → £600 ★★★★★

KEF's Dolby Atmos-enabled reflective modules are a smart choice to beef up a system. Using the company's Uni-Q point source drivers pays dividends, enabling full-range sonics that reach deep into your cinema room. First-rate build. *HCC #252*



### 02 Yamaha WX-AD10 → £150 ★★★★★

Simple to use, unobtrusive add-on that brings MusicCast multiroom/hi-res streaming to legacy AV gear via 3.5mm/phono. Not a bad price – only available in grey, unfortunately. *HCC #274*



### 03 Amazon Echo Dot

→ £50 ★★★★★

Less impressive as a standalone speaker than its larger sibling, but more affordable. Use its 3.5mm output and Bluetooth to pair with third-party kit. Fun AI experience. A real bargain. *HCC #269*



### 04 Nvidia Shield Android TV

→ £180 ★★★★★

The Android-based streamer/gaming box gets a gentle revamp – same silicon, neater design, new features including future support for Google Assistant. Slick and easy to use. *HCC #272*



### 05 Roku Streaming Stick+

→ £70 ★★★★★

If a simple life is your aim, this content-rich, 4K/HDR-capable dongle from the streaming specialist is your friend. Idiot-proof interface and control. Good price. *HCC #282*



### 06 Amazon Fire TV (2017)

→ £70 ★★★★★

HDR playback has been added to Amazon's great-value media streamer, although the absence of an Ethernet port does niggle considering its 4K talents. Cluttered UI. *HCC #280*



### 07 Panasonic SC-GA10

→ £230 ★★★★★

Panasonic partners with Google Assistant for its debut smart speaker, and doesn't forget to focus on sonic power as well as AI fun. Pricier than many rivals, but still appealing. *HCC #284*



### 08 Apple TV 4K

→ £180 (32GB) ★★★★★

With Apple's iTunes movie store offering 4K HDR (Dolby Vision) movies at the same price as Full HD downloads, this compact media player (irritating handset aside) is sure to tempt. *HCC #284*



### 09 PSB Imagine XA

→ £350 ★★★★★

These two-way Dolby Atmos-enabled upfiring speakers are fairly chunky, but work well at creating a height layer and the £350-per-pair ticket makes them an enticing option. *HCC #264*



### 10 Xbox One X

→ £450 ★★★★★

The most advanced games console on the planet dazzles with its native 4K HDR gaming chops, but the price tag is hefty and heavyweight users may wish it came with more than 1TB of storage. *HCC #280*

## TOP 5 Blu-ray/DVD boxsets



### Blue Planet II

A fine 4K companion to the BBC's previous *Planet Earth II*, this set delivers seven episodes of expertly edited and informative natural history, with crisp, colour-rich HDR visuals and immersive audio. *HCC #283* ★★★★★



### Heimat: Limited Ed. Boxset

Fifteen hours of epic German TV drama, following a single family from 1919 to 1982, are collected together in this extras-rich BD package from Second Sight. Visuals benefit from a restoration of the original negs. *HCC #285* ★★★★★



### Buck Rogers in the 25th Century: The Complete Series

A lack of decent extras takes the shine off this package somewhat, but Buck looks pretty good in HD and the show remains as weird and wonderful as ever. *HCC #285* ★★★★★



### Hammer Volume 2: Criminal Intent

Indicator again raids Hammer's library to dig up four black-and-white crime thrillers from the late '50s/early '60s. Extras include an alternate cut of 1961's *Cash on Demand*. *HCC #284* ★★★★★



### The Deuce: The Complete First Season

David Simon (*The Wire*) is the brains behind this evocative porn industry drama set in 1970s New York. This boxset offers quality AV and a couple of informative chat tracks. *HCC #284* ★★★★★



## TOP 10 Soundbars & Soundbases



**01 Yamaha YSP-5600SW** →£1,900 ★★★★★  
With its 46 drivers (including upfiring) this premium 'bar delivers precisely-steered and immersive audio, even of the Atmos variety. Potent wireless sub and 4K-capable HDMI switching sweeten the high-end deal. *HCC #254*



**02 Canton DM55** →£330 ★★★★★  
Canton's smallest soundbase still delivers big sonic thrills. Twin woofers underpin clean and crisp mids and highs, and build quality is first-rate. Doddle to use. Bluetooth built-in. *HCC #260*



**03 Samsung HW-K950** →£1,300 ★★★★★  
Soundbar with additional wireless rears and Dolby Atmos support via four upfiring drivers. Impressively largescale performance, good connectivity. No native DTS support. *HCC #263*



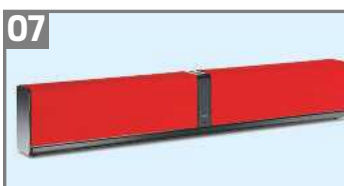
**04 Samsung HW-MS750 / SWA-W700** →£700/£600 ★★★★★  
Upfiring drivers on this premium 'bar, but no Atmos decoding. Performance still dazzles, and the optional sub shows its merits with movie soundmixes. *HCC #278*



**05 Sony HT-ST5000** →£1,500 ★★★★★  
High-end Dolby Atmos-capable soundbar/sub. Upfiring elevate the soundstage (but don't wraparound). Sound quality overall is excellent, blending muscle and depth with musicality. *HCC #275*



**06 Q Acoustics M3** →£300 ★★★★★  
A 4in x 6in woofer is tucked away in the M3's eye-catching angular chassis, ensuring this well-priced soundbar has a full-range performance. Simple to use. Bluetooth streaming. *HCC #271*



**07 DALI Kubik One** →£800 ★★★★★  
The Danish speaker brand brings a slice of glamour to your setup with this stylish soundbar. No HDMI or digital decoding but it packs a tight, lively and nuanced sound. *HCC #269*



**08 JBL Bar Studio** →£150 ★★★★★  
No subwoofer here, just a fairly compact stereo 'bar that offers a useful soundstage-widening 'Surround' mode, HDMI ARC connectivity, and a decent performance for the price. *HCC #284*



**09 Q Acoustics M2** →£300 ★★★★★  
Easily accommodated in/on AV furniture, and packing HDMI ARC for a simple hookup, this BMR-driver/ built-in woofer soundbase impresses with its energetic delivery and price. *HCC #279*



**10 JBL Bar 5.1** →£650 ★★★★★  
Switchable between stereo and 5.1 via battery-powered surround modules, this HDMI-toting package offers a cable-free multichannel solution. A 10in subwoofer underpins the soundfield. *HCC #283*

## TOP 5 Back-catalogue Blu-rays



**Charley Varrick**  
Walter Matthau stars in and Don Siegel directs this superior 1973 bank robbery thriller, brought to UK Blu-ray by indie label Indicator. A great-looking Full HD transfer and excellent selection of extras. *HCC #283*  
★★★★★



**The Awful Truth**  
Cary Grant and Irene Dunne star in this 1938 screwball comedy given an assured BD release by The Criterion Collection, with a monochrome image (based on a 4K restoration) that is a joy to behold. *HCC #285*  
★★★★★



**Night of the Living Dead**  
The Criterion Collection pleases fans of George A. Romero's genre-defining 1968 horror with a labour-of-love two-disc BD release. Image quality benefits from a consistent 4K restoration; extras are plentiful. *HCC #283*  
★★★★★



**Suspiria: Limited Edition**  
Dario Argento's 1977 classic receives a second UK Blu-ray, with a new 4K restoration making amends for the previous lacklustre effort from 2010. Plenty of worthwhile extras; 5.1 DTS-HD MA audio. *HCC #282*  
★★★★★



**Casablanca: Premium Collection**  
A fresh transfer (from a 4K scan), lossless audio and some new extras make this double-disc BD release for the much-loved war-time romance an essential purchase. *HCC #284*  
★★★★★



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# TOP 5 PVRs



## Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and smart TiVo functionality. If you're in a cable area, consider it

★★★★★



## Sky Q, £subscription

Sky's new top-tier product offering dazzles with its image-rich user interface, wireless multiroom skills and recording flexibility delivered by the PVR's 12 tuners. Now supports 4K content

★★★★★



## Humax FVP-5000T

Revamped menus, faster operation and tweaks to its triple-tuner engine make this the most advanced Freeview Play PVR around – and it doubles admirably as a DLNA player/media jukebox. 500GB/1TB/2TB

★★★★★



## Humax DTR-T4000, £subscription

This YouView-based PVR is required to get BT Sport's new Ultra HD channel – available to those with BT fast fibre and a BT TV sub. Easy to use and with 1TB of storage

★★★★★



## EE TV Smart Box £subscription

This quad-tuner 1TB PVR, from the mobile/broadband corp, offers innovative Replay 24-hour channel recording and great Smart device streaming. Needs more catch-up though

★★★★★

# TOP 5 Headphones



## Sony MDR-HW700DS, £800

Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb – great for late-night listening

★★★★★



## Sony MDR-1000X, £360

Superior noise-cancelling cans with hi-res audio support via Sony's LDAC wireless transmission tech. Slick, touch-sensitive operation and healthy battery life. Fulsome sound and comfy to wear

★★★★★



## 1More MK802, £150

Ignore the bling-tastic blue or red finishes and focus on the assured sound performance from these well-priced closed-back cans. Features include wireless Bluetooth and app control (with burn-in mode). Great value

★★★★★



## Bowers & Wilkins PX, £330

B&W adds noise-cancelling to the general spec of its previous P7 wireless cans, a welcome update for those seeking uninterrupted listening. Offers a neutral, balanced sound suited to both movies and music

★★★★★



## Audio Technica ATH-SR9, £400

45mm drivers and Audio Technica's Midpoint Mount tech deliver wide, deep, spacious sonics. Memory foam padding aids listener comfort; 3m cable should suit most AV setups

★★★★★

# TOP 5 Wireless speakers



## KEF Muo, £300

Portable Bluetooth speaker that's a cut above much of the competition. KEF's sonic knowhow results in a punchy, dynamic presentation that cherishes lossless rips. Excellent build quality

★★★★★



## Sony SRS-X11, £60

An affordable palm-sized Bluetooth speaker with internal rechargeable battery, Sony's SRS-X11 is supremely portable and sounds decent for the money. A neat little gizmo. Get two and they can work in stereo

★★★★★



## Q Acoustics BT3, £280

Bluetooth stereo pair with optical input makes a good alternative to a soundbar (there's even a subwoofer pre-out) while remaining a dab hand at music. Neat and tidy design, good price

★★★★★



## AirPulse Audio A200, £800

Monitor-style active speakers offering physical and wireless hookups, a premium build and a sweet yet weighty sound delivered by ribbon tweeters and 5.5in midbass drivers

★★★★★



## Denon HEOS 5 HS2, £350

The mid-range multiroom speaker gets a second-gen revamp, adding welcome hi-res audio playback and Bluetooth connectivity. Gorgeous looks, boisterous, room-filling sound

★★★★★

# HOME CINEMA Choice

## → IN THE NEXT ISSUE

**Sonic selection** What caught our eye (and ear) at the Munich High-End Show

**The sound of music** We chat to legendary Hollywood scoring mixer Dennis Sands

**Small but perfect** Stunning bedroom cinema

## → REVIEWS

Trinnov Altitude 16 processor Q Acoustics 3050i

5.1 speaker system LG OLED65E8 4K TV

Optoma UHD51 projector Sony KD-XF8505 4K TV

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ISSUE  
#287 ON SALE  
June 14

CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER



# AV Avenger

Could the everyday future of personal home cinema not be as technically complex as virtual reality, but just a smartphone with a wider aspect ratio? **Steve May** is almost convinced

**THERE'S A HACKNEYED** phrase that really grinds my gears. It goes something like this: 'You really need to watch this film on the bigscreen.'

It's typically trotted out during movie reviews, usually about expensive popcorn blockbusters. The implication that everyone watching at home has an inadequate 'smallscreen.'

I don't know about you, but my telly at home is plenty big, thank you very much. Who the heck has small TVs these days anyway?

But what if that smallscreen jibe isn't about the telly box at all? What if it's a reference to a smartphone or laptop?

Suitably updated, does that phrase suddenly make much more sense? Astounding but true, I actually know people who don't own a television at all, and do all their viewing on a laptop. Which begs the question: is it possible to have a cinematic experience on a truly smallscreen or mobile device?

Computer corp Dell seems to think so. It's made that the very hook for the advertising campaign of its XPS13. This Core i7-powered laptop boasts 'Dell Cinema Technology' for 'more vibrant colour, more powerful sound'...

Similarly, while many think of Dolby Atmos as an immersive home theatre sound format, designed to wrap us in a cocoon of visceral effects, recent announcements have seen the object-based system migrate to mobile phones. Samsung's Galaxy S9 and the Huawei P20 both come with Atmos onboard.

## Downsizing my expectations

To be honest, the very idea that I would watch movies or TV shows on a titchy portable screen has always seemed anathema, but I accept that there's an argument for using a portable screen for film fun. After all, you can't sit in a real theatre all day.

I recently took delivery of an Honor 7x, which really focused my mind. The upstart sibling brand of Chinese giant Huawei, Honor specialises in high-spec, lower-cost Android smartphones. The £270 7x is one such example.

The reason this particular smartphone came my way was because of its unusual 18:9 ratio display, the first on a mid-range mobile. Honor suggests it will 'Max Your View' and with good reason. This isn't a phone – **it wants to be a CinemaScope media player you can fit in your pocket.**

The 5.93in display has a Full HD+ resolution of 2,160 x 1,080, and you can comfortably watch it close without obvious artefacts. The picture is bright and vibrant, and the battery life is good enough for lengthy sessions out of the house. But what's it actually like with streaming services?

Running the Sky Q smartphone app, 16:9 content plays with slim black bars left and right. If you prefer, you can zoom the image full width, cropping the image top and bottom.

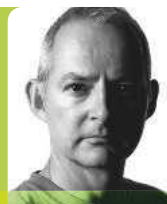
However, a 'Scope movie will fill the frame to the edges, with only slight black bars top and bottom. It's a similar viewing experience with Amazon Prime and Netflix, which can also play 21:9 videos with slight bars top and bottom or zoomed to fill the screen. Viewed close (obviously), it is indeed appealingly cinematic.

The 7x isn't an audiophile smartphone or media player. It doesn't support hi-res formats, but sounds acceptable enough through good-quality cans.

I'm left wondering if everything I know is wrong. You might even call it an epiphany. Maybe you really can have a cinema-lite experience on the smallscreen after all? ■

*Do you often watch movies/TV on a portable device?  
Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)*

**Steve May** is now seeking a mobile phone with a 4:3 aspect ratio so he can better enjoy re-runs of *Only Fools and Horses* while on the go





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